MICHAEL SWANWICK

MOON DOGS

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Moon Dogs

is the 2000 Boskone book by Guest of Honor Michael Swanwick. It is a sampling of his work, with seven stories, one play, six essays, and two speeches. Two of the stories, "Moon Dogs" and "Mickelrede," are new.

Michael Swanwick has given readings of the title story to general acclaim, and the NESFA Press is proud to make it available. "Mickelrede" is one of his posthumous collaborations with Avram Davidson, and gives an intriguing look into the creative process. His other such collaboration, "Vergil Magus: King Without Country," is another chance for the reader to visit with the mage from *The Phoenix and the Mirror.*

The range of his fiction work is represented with the short novel *Griffin's Egg,* and the award-winning play "The Dead." Among the essays here are the hard-to-find "The Death of the Magus: Two Myths" and "The Hagiography of Saint Dozois," and the bizarre tale of "Jane Swanwick and the Search for Identity." His discussions of the sf field, "A User's Guide to the Postmoderns" and "In the Tradition ...," are witty and insightful surveys—so much so that the former has even been pirated in countries around the world.

His collaboration with Jack Dann, "Ships" (in its first American publication), and two of his several collaborations with Gardner Dozois, "Ancestral Voices" and "The City of God," are further demonstrations of the range of his fiction.

The introduction is by Hugo-winning editor Gardner Dozois. The full-color dustjacket art is by Boskone 37 Official Artist Rick Berry.

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Moon Dogs

by

Michael Swanwick

with

Jack Dann

Avram Davidson

Gardner Dozois

Edited by Ann A. Broomhead & Timothy P. Szczesuil

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MICHAEL SWANWICK:
The Chameleon Eludes the Net
by Gardner Dozois

One of the most popular and respected of all the new writers who entered the field in the '80s, Michael Swanwick made his debut in 1980 with two strong and compelling stories, "The Feast of St. Janis" and "Ginungagap," both of which were Nebula award finalists that year, and which were both selected either for a Best of the Year anthology or for that year's annual Nebula Awards volume—as auspicious a debut as anyone has ever made, even in a field known for lightning rises to prominence.

Swanwick is a chameleonic writer, difficult to pin down as belonging firmly to one aesthetic camp or another, although attempts have been made to claim him for various movements over the years. He writes everything from hard-science to Tolkienesque fantasy, but puts his own unique spin on everything he writes. During the '80s, during the Cyberpunk Wars, most critics included him in the cyberpunk camp, although the cyberpunks *themselves* never really seemed to accept him as One Of Them, in spite of his famous collaboration with William Gibson on "Dogfight," and in spite of the fact that his novel *Vacuum Flowers* is usually listed as part of the cyberpunk canon by outside crit-

ics who are not themselves cyberpunks—and indeed, whatever it was that he was doing that made him appear to some to be writing cyberpunk, he was doing it on his own in stories such as "Ginungagap" long before the cyberpunks themselves were publishing much that looked like cyberpunk, certainly long before the publication of Gibson's *Neuromancer* in 1985. So it was a matter of convergent evolution rather than influence, I think, as far as Swanwick's relationship to cyberpunk is concerned. Similarly, Swanwick is now widely accepted as having written one of the two main "Post-Cyberpunk" works with *Stations of the Tide* (the other is Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*)—but if you go back and look at works such as "Ginungagap," you can see that he was writing stuff that resembles "post-cyberpunk" *then*, before the Cyberpunk Revolution had even really gotten underway. So pinning him down to one of these categories is rather like trying to catch fog in a net.

Although recognizable traces of the influence of the work of writers such as Jack Vance, Cordwainer Smith, Samuel R. Delany, Brian W. Aldiss, Philip K. Dick, Howard Waldrop, Walter M. Miller, Roger Zelazny, and perhaps even John Varley (although Varley started publishing only a few years before Swanwick himself did; influences turn over *fast* in the science fiction field!), can be seen in Swanwick's work, Swanwick has absorbed these influences and transmuted them into his own voice, producing work unlike anything that *any* of those writers would have produced.

In fact, one Swanwick story is rarely much like any *other* Swanwick story, a trait he shares with other chameleonic writers such as Bruce Sterling, Walter Jon Williams, and Robert Reed. A restless, tireless, and intensely ambitious writer, always looking for new challenges and even-steeper hills to climb, always upping the literary ante on himself, Swanwick has rarely been satisfied to work any one patch of literary ground for long.

In the last nineteen years, as one of the most prolific and consistently inventive of all the field's short-story writers, he has stayed in the public eye, and on major award ballots, with intense and powerful stories that explore every corner of the genre: he's taken us to a hard-edged, high-tech future in stories such "Griffin's Egg," "Trojan Horse," "Snow Angels," the aforementioned "Dogfight" and "Ginungagap," "The Dead," "The Mask," "Wild Minds," and "Moon Dogs"; he's taken us to the furthest reaches of the solar system in stories such as "Archaic

Planets: Nine Excerpts from the Encyclopedia Galactica" (with Sean Swanwick) and "The Very Pulse of the Machine," which won him a Hugo Award in 1999; to the far future in stories such as "The Wisdom of Old Earth," "Mother Grasshopper" (which takes place on a planet-sized grasshopper, one of the strangest *milieux* in science fiction history), "The Blind Minotaur," and "The City of God"; to the literal end of the world in stories like the subtle and surreal "The Edge of the World," which won him a Theodore Sturgeon Award in 1990; to the creation of enigmatic new worlds in "Covenant of Souls"; and on beyond the world as we the living know it for a bizarre and harrowing vision of life-after-death in "Radio Waves," which won him a World Fantasy Award in 1996; he's written vividly about human relationships with The Alien in stories such as "A Midwinter's Tale" and "Ancestral Voices"; he's spun time-paradox webs of bleak and elegant complexity in stories such as "Radiant Doors" and "Scherzo with Tyrannosaur"; he's played tricky, mind-bending games with Reality in "Microcosmic Dog," "Foresight," "Walking Out," and "The Transformation of Philip K."; he's dealt with the search for immortality, and the price you have to pay for it, in "Ancient Engines"; he's taken us to Alternate Worlds in "Mummer Kiss," "In Concert," and "The Feast of Saint Janis" ... **and** he has mixed genres with fearless abandon and verve as well, forming fascinating new hybrids of science fiction and fantasy in stories such as "The Changeling's Tale," "The Dragon Line," "Cold Iron," "Golden Apples of the Sun," "North of Diddy-Wah-Diddy," and "The Man Who Met Picasso."

His versatility and invention are great enough to enable him to collaborate successfully with writers as radically different as William Gibson, Jack Dann, Gardner Dozois, and Avram Davidson—in the case of the posthumous collaboration with Davidson, where he took a fragment Davidson had left uncompleted at the time of his death and turned it into a completed, living story ("Vergil Magus: King Without Country"), Swanwick accomplished the amazing feat of being able to match Davidson's erudite, recursive, ornate, complex literary style well enough that critics have not been able to figure out where Davidson's prose leaves off and Swanwick's begins, a feat that perhaps only two or three other writers working in the genre today *might* have been able to accomplish (Or Maybe Not, as Davidson used to say); in the case of his might-just-as-well-have-been-posthumous collaborations with me, he breathed new life and vitality into long-dead story fragments that had languished in a

filing cabinet for years, and once again did it with such skill and dexterity that it is nearly impossible to tell which sections of the stories I originally wrote and which sections Michael wrote nearly twenty years later.

The number of writers who have ever achieved that level of professional skill, in the entire history of the genre, can be counted without running through the fingers of both hands.

At first, Swanwick's reputation as a novelist lagged behind his reputation as a short story writer, with his first novel, *In the Drift*—published in 1985 as part of Terry Carr's resurrected Ace Specials line, along with first novels by William Gibson, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Lucius Shepard—largely ignored by the critics, and panned by some of them. His second novel, though, the critically-acclaimed *Vacuum Flowers,* caused a stir, and with his third and perhaps best-known novel, *Stations of the Tide,* which won him a Nebula Award in 1991, he established himself firmly as among the vanguard of the hot new novelists of the '90s. His next novel, *The Iron Dragon's Daughter,* a finalist for both the World Fantasy Award *and* the Arthur C. Clarke Award (a unique distinction!), explored new literary territory on the ambiguous border-land of science fiction and fantasy, and has been hailed by some critics as the first example of an as-yet still nascent subgenre called "Hard Fantasy" (sort of a mix between the Dickensian sensibilities of "steam-punk," high-tech science fiction, and traditional Tolkienesque fantasy). His most recent novel, *Jack Faust,* a sly reworking of the Faust legend that explores the unexpected impact of technology on society, blurs genre boundaries even more, and has garnered rave reviews from nearly every source from *The Washington Post* to *Interzone.* Although his last few novels seemed to be taking him away from science fiction (and perhaps even away from conventional genre fantasy) toward that vaguely defined territory that might be described as "American Magic Realism," or perhaps "Postmodernism," I doubt that he will ever entirely abandon the field—at least some of his short fiction remains solidly centered here, and, in fact, falls under the heading of rigorous and ingeniously worked-out "hard science" … and his new novel, currently underway, features time-travelers and some very hungry dinosaurs, core SF themes … although no doubt, in Swanwick's hands, they are due to have some unexpected changes rung on them!

Swanwick's other books include *Griffin's Egg,* one of the most brilliant and compelling of modern-day Moon-colony stories. His short

fiction has been assembled in *Gravity's Angels* and in a collection of my collaborative short work with other writers, *Slow Dancing Through Time*. His most recent books are a collection of critical articles, *The Postmodern Archipelago,* and a new collection, *A Geography of Unknown Lands*. Swanwick lives in Philadelphia with his wife, Marianne Porter, and their son Sean.

At any one time in the history of science fiction, there are perhaps seven or eight writers who are vital to the evolution of the genre; gather those writers all together in the same room, throw a bomb into that room, and you wipe out at a stroke much of the potential of the genre's future, forcing SF into a radically different, and probably markedly inferior, timeline. Let's hope that Swanwick stays away from rooms that are about to have bombs thrown into them, because right at the moment he *is* one of those seven or eight writers, someone doing vital and seminal work, and I have a feeling that, given luck, he will be one of the factors shaping the evolution of SF well into the new century to come.

Moon Dogs

For Marianne
Because a beautiful woman
can never be given too much jewelry
or too many dedications

Author Profile: Michael Swanwick

I've just spent the morning going through my notebooks. The *Scribbledehobbledehoydenii* I named them because James Joyce titled his *Scribbledehob*, and I was young and ambitious and more than a touch arrogant. I'm not sure exactly how many notebooks I've filled by now—somewhere around a hundred is a fair guess—with my unreadable scrawl and gnostic abbreviations. But I only went through the oldest, those dating back to 1973 and 1974. Because if I'm to tell you anything at all about myself, that's where I have to start.

In the winter of 1973 I arrived in Philadelphia with a suitcase full of clothes, seventy dollars in traveler's checks, a friend who was willing to put me up on his couch for a few weeks, and the absolute conviction that science fiction was the highest form of literature and that I could teach myself to write it.

Today, in those notebooks, I can find no reason why I should have believed I would ever publish anything. It was madness. I could not write well, and indeed I could hardly write at all. Over the course of that long, dark winter (during which I lost forty pounds for lack of food), I sold my blood, ghosted term papers, did a little freelance typing at a dollar a page, and held down the kind of temp jobs where you have to know where your employer lives if you hope to ever get paid. I invented words and grammars, struggled to import Brion Gysin's "cut-up" method

into sword and sorcery, studied the New Wave, and began stories that I could not complete.

In the spring, I landed a job as a typist. By then I was sharing a house with three art students, across the street from a flophouse ("Sister Minnie's Kitchen" the sign read, left over from an earlier incarnation), and next door to the Sahara Hotel, where rooms rented by the hour and contained no more furniture than a box spring and mattress. In my notebooks, I find synopses of nightmares, transcribed conversations with derelicts and confidence men, and an account of the night a wino fell asleep with a cigarette in his mouth, setting fire to the mattress and then to the flophouse and the fire engines came and the art students rushed out to set up their easels on the sidewalk and paint it all. Fiction still came painfully. I schematicized universes of Nabokovian elaboration, listed the names of ships in vacuum dock around imaginary planets, memorized passages from Barthelme and Davidson and Pynchon, and tried to write like Wolfe, Russ, Ellison, Cortázar, Le Guin, and Delany all at once.

Six years later I finally finished a story.

It was as if God had reached down and flicked a switch. The stories came, and sold, and were noticed. My first two published works ("Ginungagap" and "The Feast of Saint Janis") were both Nebula award finalists. I had finally made a beginning.

That was five novels and fifty-some stories ago. Since then I've lost somewhere between fifteen and twenty major awards, and won three: a Sturgeon for "The Edge of the World," a World Fantasy Award for "Radio Waves," and a Nebula for *Stations of the Tide*. In 1980, Marianne Porter (who sometimes appears in my acknowledgments as "the M.C. Porter Endowment for the Arts") and I were married. Nineteen years later we are still together. Our son, Sean, is sixteen years old and a junior in high school. The important stuff of life keeps on happening.

Back in '73 and '74, those years of ecstasy and dread, almost nothing that was essential made it onto the page. Dear friends appear only once, or not at all. No mention is made of my first meeting with Susan Casper, though in a description of a pseudomedieval street fair I find an offhand reference to Gardner "Dubois." And no matter how hard I look, I can find not a hint that I was planning someday to write my own version of the Faust legend.

It was in high school that I first encountered Kit Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. In those days I had climbed from my childhood ambition of being an inventor to the nobler one of being a research scientist. But, oh, how Marlowe's words did rattle and chime! They shook me to the bone. I didn't realize yet that my aspirations had taken another surge upward.

I did know, however, that Marlowe had missed half of the potential of the legend. The archetypal Faust story is (this is received wisdom, part of the common lore we all "know") that of damnation by science. Yet as soon as Marlowe's Faustus sells his soul, science disappears entirely from the text. A few pranks, some low laughs, a glimpse of Helen, and then down the coal scuttle he goes. Goethe's *Faust* is all about Margarete (*Part I*) and philosophy (*Part II*). Thomas Mann's Adrian Leverkühn—see how I oversimplify!—is about music and the German soul. I determined that someday I would do it right.

For almost thirty years I carried within me the secret that someday I would create a Faust who actually gets what he bargains for and is damned thereby. Periodically I took stock of myself, to see if my writing were up to the task yet. It never was.

None of that's in the *Scribbledehobbledehoydenii*.

Not a word, not a breath, not a hint, not a hair. In fact, the first shiver of premonition of my intent that ever reached paper was in 1995, when I began to assemble notes toward the construction of *Jack Faust*.

Perhaps the problem was simply that existence was too intense, too chaotic. One day in December, coming home from a miserable temp job as a toy demonstrator in a department store, I realized that I was following a trail of blood—one bright red splash on the pavement every quarter-block or so. Small knots of people were talking nervously all up and down 12th Street. Two stick-up artists had been targeting salesmen in the area and the police had set out a decoy with an open walkie-talkie in his briefcase. In the ensuing clash, one of the robbers had run, been shot, and kept on running.

The trail turned left on Rodman Street, and then jagged into the courtyard of the apartment where I was staying. I stepped back as the body was carried out. Inside, detectives were smoking Kents by the chalk outline. My friends stood on their doorstep, spooky-eyed and silent. I went inside and tried to write about it and failed. I was heavily into mythological structure then, trying to emulate Barth's "Dunyazadiad" and worshipping the great Delazny, he who wrote "A Rose

for Ecclesiastes" and "The Star Pit." But the raw matter of what was happening before me—the blood, the passion, the fear—didn't want to be reduced to mythic structure, and didn't work as mere reportage, and I couldn't discover what shape it wanted to be.

By Christmas I was living with the art students. To celebrate, I fixed myself two turkey pot pies (instead of my usual one) and opened a tiny can of cranberry jelly. All my friends were out of town. Leroy, one of the winos from across the street, knocked at the door and tried to panhandle some money. When I said I didn't have any, he cursed me until I closed the door in his face. I got out my notebook and tried to write.

Where to end? Perhaps here, in the winter of 1974, when things had begun to calm down just a bit, and I opened my door one Sunday morning to discover all of Center City encased in ice and holy silence. Not a car or truck or airplane anywhere. Just blue sky, frigid cold, and the windchime tinkling of small twigs snapping off of sparkling trees.

Enchanted, I stepped outside—and nearly broke a leg falling down the stoop. The sidewalk was almost frictionless, and it was hard to get back on my feet. But when I did, I found myself alone in a city of wonder. Two stone lions guarding a doorway shone as if dipped in diamond. My gloved hand glided a millimeter above their surface. Stone columns, doorbells, automobiles, fire hydrants—everything had been rendered untouchable. It was as if I had been translated to the land of ghosts.

Slowly, carefully, I made my way through the enchanted city.

On Lombard Street, I was hailed by an old woman with a rubber-tipped cane. With an apologetic laugh that had just a touch of fear in it, she said, "Young man, can you help me to the corner store? I got up this morning and there wasn't any milk for the cat. But now I'm stranded. I don't dare move at all."

Cautiously I edged her way and offered my arm. "I'm having trouble walking too," I confessed. "But if we hold each other up, I think we can get there."

Moon Dogs

He went to a spa where, for a fee, they would drown you as often as you liked. You wouldn't actually die, because they put a shunt in your skull and kept the brain oxygenated, but your body didn't know that and your survival reflexes would kick in so that you'd choke and gag and fight for oxygen as you experienced the desperation of approaching death. You could thrash and struggle for hours. The water was ice-cold and as dark as tea. If you panicked and did too much damage to your body, there was a clinic nearby where you could rest while solicitous friends in white coats cured it.

After they had emptied his lungs, removed the shunt, and switched on a small fire, the counselors gave Nick a blanket and withdrew, leaving him alone in the woods to contemplate the experience in peace.

Shivering, Nick drew the blanket around him. He didn't feel any better than he had before. He hadn't experienced any kind of release at all. His mood was as bleak as ever. Life still felt hopeless.

A while later, he put on the clothing they had left him, folded up the blanket, switched off the fire, and stood. The night was quiet and dark, lit only by a low moon. There was a path over the hill that led to the lodge. He heard two of the staff laughing quietly over something one had said, just before their propane torches disappeared. But he didn't feel like going back to the lodge and their hired warmth and camaraderie. Not just yet.

Instead, he put the moon to his back and went the other direction, deeper into the woods, and was quickly lost. He did not care. The woods were tangled and random, a jumble of tree trunks and deadfall, some lying broken on the ground, others propped up by other trees. There was no pattern in them, he reflected, nothing to fix the eye upon. It seemed a perfect metaphor for everything.

It was then he saw the sycamores, pale in the moonlight.

The sycamores formed a ghostly ring around an empty darkness. They looked like a Druidic temple. He thought at first that they were former ornamentals—this had been a populous suburb not a century ago—marking the perimeter of a house long fallen to ruin. But then he saw how the ground within sank downward and realized that the bowl-shaped depression they marked was carved by the same small stream that had fed his drowning pool. At its center would be another ceremonial pool, perhaps, or else a minuscule swamp.

He walked closer and as he did so a pale white flame resolved itself into existence at the center of the darkness. He squinted, unsure as to its reality, and continued walking. Then he saw the white shape stoop, and heard a splash of water.

"Hello?" he said.

The shape flinched, turned, and in a woman's voice said, "Who are you?"

"My name's Nick. Do you want me to go away?"

"No, I'm about done here. You can dry me off."

Nick walked to the edge of the water. The woman stood knee-deep within it. In the gloom she was hard to see. Her crotch was filled with shadow; her navel was the merest smudge. He couldn't make out her mouth or nose at all. Twin falls of long, dark hair framed eyes that mirrored the black water in which she stood.

"The towel's by your feet."

He was reaching for the towel when something came bounding out of obscurity. It was a gundog, long and as elegantly constructed as antique Swiss clockwork. "Touch the lady and you're a dead man," it growled. There was a clicking noise from its abdomen.

"Stand down your armaments, Otto. He's not threatening me."

With a mechanical whine the gundog sat. There were other machines in the woods, gray shadows that prowled and circled without rest. Nick tried to count them. Three, six—too many to count.

The woman stood before Nick and turned her back. "Well?"

Carefully he dried her off, starting with her hair and shoulders, moving down her back and over her rump. Her body had the sculptural perfection of a Brancusi marble. He crouched to dry the back of her legs, and when he reached the ankles, she turned around to face him. She was so close he could smell her: fresh and clean, with accents of oak-leaf and cedar.

She took the towel and did her front, then squatted and let Otto blow hot air on her.

When she was dry, the woman dressed in jeans and a shirt. She wrapped her hair up in the towel, like a turban, and said, "My house is just over the hill. Cocoa?"

"Why not?"

The kitchen was bright and clean. They sat at the table and talked. Her name, she said, was Selene. The gundogs came and went, patrolling the grounds, occasionally lying silent at her feet. Their metal nails clicked softly on the floor.

"Why do you want to die?" Selene asked, when they'd been talking a while.

"I don't *want* to die—it's something I'm trying to purge from my subconscious. But when you've seen your parents die, and your brothers die, and your sister die, and nine-tenths of the kids in the first orphanage die, and half of those in the second … Well. There's bound to be a certain amount of survivor guilt."

She studied his face. "No," she said at last, "it's not that."

"Then I don't know what it is."

"No. You don't."

"And you do?"

"I didn't say that. But if I had your problem, I would at least know what it was. I'll bet you live in one of the new city-cores. Neon, noise, smoky little bars. Everybody crammed as close together as they can get."

"Yeah, so?"

"So that's evasion. You want to understand yourself, you've got to experience a little isolation. Go off alone by yourself. In the winter, sometimes I go for weeks without seeing another human being."

"What exactly do you do out here?"

"I hunt. That's what the 'dogs are for. I have a little money and so I hunt. Deer mostly. But I bagged a puma not long back."

"It hardly seems fair. All that machinery against one little deer."

Her look was unfathomable. "There's the couch. Get some sleep. I'll wake you in the morning and take you out with me. You'll see then."

The woods were misty and indistinct. Selene led him out into them, her hounds flowing about her like a river of quicksilver. She wore a Teflon jacket over her plaid shirt, and she carried a hunting knife on her belt. Amber goggles hung from a cord around her neck.

"Okay," Nick said. "So how is this thing done?"

"First we deploy the 'dogs." Selene swept out an arm and half the pack scattered into the surrounding woods. The remaining six stayed with her, alert and tireless. The sound of the machines thrashing through the undergrowth died away to nothing surprisingly quickly.

"What do we do now?"

"Enjoy the woods." She drew in a deep breath, let it out. "Smell those pines! The 'dogs will let us know when they've flushed something worthwhile."

"I think ..."

"Don't. Don't think, don't talk, just walk. And listen. Try to appreciate how lucky you are to be here at all."

Hunting, it seemed, consisted largely of walking. Selene moved unhurriedly, picking easy ways, going always deeper into the woods. Occasionally one of the 'dogs barked once or twice in the distance. "Just letting me know where they are," she said when Nick asked. "Now, hush."

Sometimes she strolled casually, heedlessly along. Other times she would tense, listening, watching, every nerve strained. Nick couldn't figure out the rhythms. Following in her wake, he stared at her long, long legs, her broad shoulders and fine back, her perfect ass. She was an Amazon. He couldn't figure her out. He couldn't help wanting her.

At noon they sent one of the 'dogs back to the house for sandwiches and a thermos of herbal tea. They ate sitting on a crumbled foundation wall, halfway up a mountain. One of the gundogs crouched at Selene's feet, staring out over the forest.

The trees went on forever. "Everything, far as the eye can see, used to be city. No place you've ever heard of either, just an endless sprawl of no-name tract housing, malls, petty manufacturing, sewage treatment plants. And now—"

"Turn off your 'dogs," Nick said.

"What?"

"Let's be alone, you and I. Turn off the 'dogs."

"No."

He picked up a stick, scraped a line in the dirt. "What are you afraid of?"

She looked at him again. Those unfathomable green eyes. "My husband."

"You have a husband?"

"It's a complicated story."

"Tell me."

For a long moment she was silent, gathering her thoughts. Then she said, "You and I are alike in some ways. We're both orphans. Only my family didn't die of cholera or malaria or typhoid fever. They were killed by Sacred Vaccine."

"I don't—"

"It was a religious cult. There were dozens just like it. They thought the human race was facing extinction. So they decided to fight back against the microbes with human sacrifice. Does that make any sense to you?"

"Well, in a way, yeah. You're afraid, so you take control by becoming what you fear."

"My family was lucky—three kids, all healthy. My parents took us out into the country, to isolate us from what was going on. They had enough money to do that."

Nick nodded. He knew the type well enough. She was a plague heiress—one of those who stood at the confluence where several streams of inheritance ran together. She'd probably never had to work in her life.

"One day there was a knock on the door. It was our neighbors. They killed everyone but me. I was the youngest. They smeared their sacred sign on my forehead with blood and then married me to one of their members. Then they let me go. I was only five years old. Joshua—my husband—was seven."

"I'm sorry," Nick said.

"I'm not looking for your sympathy. I've had time enough to work things through. The bad times are over. I like my life. Only … my parents were pacifists. I'm not." She balled a fist and rapped him on the chest with it, just a little too hard. "Keep that in mind."

"So this Joshua—he's been bothering you?"

"He—"

A sudden baying rose up in the distance. Selene shot to her feet, listening. The baying was answered by a second, a third, until all the dogs were howling.

Selene quickly donned her goggles. "Isn't that a lovely sound?"

"Yes." It was.

"It's a recording. The breed that bayed like that died out during the plague decades. Lost, like so many things that lacked the people to keep them going." She scanned the horizon, matching mountains to her goggles' mapping graphics. Then she pointed. "That way. That's where they'll drive him. Come on—run!"

"Down this way!"

Selene had tied her jacket around her waist. It made a tail that leaped like a flag as she bounded down the slope of the ravine. Nick followed clumsily.

At the bottom, she showed him where to stand, between two trees. "The 'dogs will run him right past you. Be careful not to get in his way! Those antlers are sharp. The hooves can do real damage. Over here, the lead will present to him. He'll shy and rear. That leaves his throat vulnerable. I'll be aiming for his carotid artery." She showed him where it was on her own throat.

"Is that all you're using? That knife?"

"When I'm running 'dogs, yes. Otherwise, I use a bow."

Nick barely had time to catch his breath when the woods erupted with baying 'dogs. Something large crashed noisily through the brush, coming straight toward him. Then the stag burst from the bushes, wild-eyed and enormous. The 'dogs were baying and snapping at its flank.

He stepped back automatically. The hunt swept right past him. Selene laughed, and stepped in its path.

She was magnificent.

A 'dog slipped around front of the stag and, bracing its legs, cried a challenge. As predicted, the beast reared back.

Selene leaped at the animal, seizing its antlers. One hand went to her belt. The other pulled back, so that the stag's long neck arched. The gundogs were snarling and leaping. Her hunting knife slashed and slashed again.

Blood sprayed everywhere. Warm flecks of it spattered his shirt and stung his face.

When the stag died, the gundogs all fell silent at once. It was eerie. Selene stepped backed from the beast, taking a deep breath. "Look at that—a six-pointer."

"Yeah."

"Are you all right?" she asked. "You're trembling."

I think I'm in love, he wanted to say. And, no, it's not all right, it's not all right at all. But instead, "No, really. I'm fine."

Selene laughed. "It's always like that—your first time."

Selene gutted the beast, then slung it over her shoulders. When Nick offered to help, she laughed at him.

Back home, she hung up the carcass to cure on a frame behind the house. "Come on inside," she said, "and we'll get cleaned up."

When Selene came out of the bathroom, toweling her hair, she wore a baby-blue bathrobe, loosely cinched. Just looking at how her body moved within it made him hard.

"Well," Nick said. "I guess it's my turn at the tub."

She looked at him steadily, wordlessly. Without warning, she hooked an ankle behind him and gave him a two-handed shove. He fell back onto the couch.

Then she was on top of him, pushing up his shirt, tugging at his belt, shoving his trousers down to his knees. Before he knew what was going on, she had him inside of her and was humping him, humping him, humping him.

It was almost rape. He wasn't at all sure he liked it at first. Then he was, and wanted it to last forever. And then it was over.

Then she took him into the bedroom and they made love again. More slowly this time.

"Don't expect much," she said afterward. "I don't like entanglements."

"Entanglements?"

"Men, then. I don't much like men."

"Do you want me to leave?" Nick asked.

"Oh, stay till morning. I'll make you breakfast." She rolled over and went to sleep.

The 'dogs padded quietly, alertly, in and out of the room, on constant patrol.

Nick got up in the middle of the night. Selene was still asleep. Moonlight flooded the room.

Silently, he put his clothes on.

The central command unit for the gundogs emitted a hum in the 330-hertz range. He was sensitive to things like that. He used the sound to find the unit, disguised as a lingerie chest, and flicked the kill switch, deactivating everything. The hum died.

She had never bothered to ask him what he did for a living. This was what he did. He sold and installed security systems.

He picked up her hunting knife.

There was a slight rustling noise. He turned and saw Selene looking at him.

Quietly, she asked, "Is there something wrong?"

Nick could feel her fear. He wanted to put down the knife and reassure her. Instead, he said, "Get out of bed."

Selene pushed the covers aside and stood, naked and vulnerable. She knew who he was now. "Joshua ..."

"It's Nick now. I changed my name when I was released. I wanted to put the past behind me."

"Nick. The plagues are over."

"That's what I used to think. But diseases mutate. They can adapt too fast for man's technology to keep up with." He found that talking gave him confidence. He felt that he was on the right track at last. "That's what brought on the great die-back: arrogance, pride, and broad-spectrum antibiotics. For a century, every disease was fought back to insignificance with drugs so widely prescribed that people thought epidemics weren't *supposed* to happen. Then the diseases adapted, resisted, and returned.

"Now you think that because we've suppressed the germs and viruses again, we've got the evil under control. But it's only come back with another name. Look at you! You're infected with the great dark thing called *fear*. You're so rotten with it you're shaking. My family was right. It never goes away. You can hide out here in the woods, you can surround yourself with gundogs. But it knows where you live. It knows when you're helpless. Sooner or later, it comes for you." Nick gestured with the knife. "Let's go outside."

He walked her out to where the deer carcass hung curing. The ground beneath it was dark with blood. "That's far enough. Stay there, with your back to me."

She obeyed. This was what fear did to you. She was stronger than he was, and faster too. But she obeyed.

"I suppose you're going to kill me." Her voice almost broke on the penultimate word, but otherwise betrayed no emotion whatsoever.

"No." Nick drew in a long breath, exhaled. "I'm going to kill myself. I thought you'd want to see it."

Astonished, she spun around. He had the knife to his throat by then. The carotid artery. He'd seen how well that worked.

"They said I was cured, and released me. I got a job. I even had a girlfriend for a while. But then I started sending you those letters. The disease had returned." The knife tickled his throat unpleasantly. "I've been thinking about this for a long time."

"Why involve *me?* What are you doing *here,* goddamnit?"

"It took me years to understand what my parents were trying to do. It's called the ceremony of triage: Inoculate the healthy. Leave the dying to their fate. Shoot the infected. Okay, it's loony. If you think of it as a way of minimizing pain, it makes a lot of—"

"Pain! What do you know about pain?" She splayed her hands across the flesh under her ribs and twisted around so he could see the scar between them. It was puckered and deep. Somehow, he hadn't noticed it when they'd screwed. "I was gored by a buck. He shoved his fucking antler right through me. Do you have any idea how much that hurt?"

"You—"

"It hurt a *lot.* I almost died then. I was lucky to make it back to the road. I was lucky that somebody came along in a car. I was lucky he stopped. I was so god-damned lucky I had no business complaining when it got infected and almost killed me a second time. But I did. Because—you know what?—it hurt like hell. And you've got the nerve to talk about pain!"

Nick didn't know what to say.

"When I got out of the hospital, I was afraid to hunt. The pain had been that bad. Afraid to hunt! So you know what I did?"

He shook his head.

"I went out and tracked down that exact same buck, and I killed it. I was terrified, but I faced up to my fear. I faced up to it, and I conquered it."

She was ablaze with anger. "You've got a problem. You're afraid. Well, join the club! *I* didn't give in to my fear. *I* faced it down. Why can't you?"

Nick took the knife down from his throat. He looked down at it, heavy and useless in his hand, for a long moment. Then he tossed it away, into darkness.

"I'm sorry," he said at last. "I'll leave now."

On the road from the house, Nick felt a strange sensation seize him. He had no name for it. But, though the woods were dark and silent about him, they didn't oppress him.

A sense of futility still clung to him, and he knew he had a long way to go. But suddenly he knew what that nameless thing was called.

Hope.

The lights came on behind him. He heard the whine of gundogs powering up, and then the frantic sound of the machines running for their appointed guardposts.

He thought how easily the devices could tear him apart. They'd do that on command. But he didn't look back. He wouldn't give in to the fear.

Never again.

Nick took a deep breath, and for the first time in his life felt free. He wanted to laugh and caper. He wanted to turn right around and make love with Selene again. The night was no longer threatening, but dark and filled with promise.

Selene was right! He could face down his fears. Someday he might even master them.

Metal paws sped through the night. A gundog sped past and, wheeling, sat waiting for him in the road.

It was Otto; he knew by the markings. The 'dog opened his mouth. What emerged was not the gruff mechanical voice Nick expected, but Selene's clear, calm soprano.

"Turn around, Nick."

He turned.

Selene stood in the yard before her house. In the light that spilled from the windows, her face was white as bone, her eye sockets black as

ink. She'd thrown on a blouse, but hadn't bothered to button it. He could see pale flesh all the way from her neck to her crotch.

She held a bow in her hand.

Shadows swarmed about her feet—gundogs, eager for her command.

"Selene—"

"You can't give in to what you fear," she said. "You have to face it down. And kill it."

There was a strange noise, like cloth tearing, and an arrow appeared in the dirt at his feet.

"I'll give you a head start. If you start running now, you just might make it back to the spa."

She nocked another arrow into her bow.

Nick took a step, another, found himself running. The road was flat and empty before him. He turned, and plunged into the brush at its side. Twigs slashed his face and grabbed at his clothes. He paid them no mind. He thought only of escape.

Behind him, one by one, the 'dogs began to bay.

The Death of the Magus: Two Myths

This is a sad thing to examine but if we don't, we'll be missing something significant. Here's the heart of it: Avram Davidson died.

Avram Davidson died, and there are two conflicting versions of what his circumstances were when he did. I've heard both first-hand from people who patently believed they were telling the truth. My informants, though, are both writers, and with the best will in the world the mere facts are to a writer nowhere near so important as what can be made of them. And a calm relation of both versions reveals them to be both myths.

"When truth becomes legend, print the legend," Hollywood tells us. Well, yes, but which legend? Here, briefly, we have laid bare before us the mechanisms of mythopoesis. It's rare to have such an opportunity, and so I propose to take a quick peek into the workings.

You'll forgive me if I smooth over a proper name here and there.

The first story is that Avram died in squalor. Someone who knew him well told me that at the time of his death he had a dank cellar apartment with walls that wept and stairs to the street that he could no longer climb. The flat was choked with damp cardboard boxes crammed with mildewing papers. The friend who told me this had carried Avram to the street in his arms. He said that the local science fiction fans had wanted to buy Avram a motorized wheelchair, but—and this was easily believed—that he had angrily rejected the idea as condescension. He relied on friends to do his grocery shopping for him, and if their memory

failed them, he had to eat whatever was on hand. He badly needed a new typewriter. One of the best writers of his age had spent out his last days, ferocious, brave, and shamefully neglected.

The first myth is one of Injustice. One cannot hear it without feeling a sense of rage against all Mankind.

I posted a comment about the above on GEnie, the low-rent computer bulletin board, and another writer came back at me to deny everything. Avram didn't die in squalor, he said. I only chose to believe that because I was in love with the myth of the suffering artist. He, my computer correspondent, knew the truth first-hand, and the *truth* was that shortly before his death Avram's fortunes had turned a corner. He had moved into a sunny and pleasant retirement cottage his friends had found for him. The noted critic Guy Davenport had arranged for him to receive a substantial grant. A local fan group had collected money to buy that motorized wheelchair for him, and found a way around his obstinate rejection of anything that smacked of charity. Energized by all this, he was writing as never before. Everything was set for a new artistic blossoming.

Then, just when everything was finally going his way, Avram died. The cumulative privations of a long and hard life had caught up with him.

The second myth is one of Irony. One cannot hear it without raging against God.

Whenever the boys get together to tell sad tales of the deaths of brilliant writers, you'll hear them speaking of Avram. Sometimes they say the one thing and sometimes they say the other. Often enough, you'll hear the same person tell both versions at one sitting. Trying them both on for size, just to see which one fits the mouth better. The shakedown process continues, and deep down everyone understands that it's not the facts that will determine which version endures. One myth will triumph, and which one that is will tell us much about ourselves. Is Avram's death a fist we wish to wave against Man or God?

I believe the truth could with some effort be determined to a reasonable degree of confidence. But it would explain nothing. The world is full of incident and nearly void of understanding. Caught as we all are in the great universal death-and-birth machine, it takes some special injustice to arouse not just our emotions but our instinctive reflex to spin the comprehending lie. And here we have it. Beneath the words

and outrage lies the simple and unacceptable fact: Avram Davidson died.

We can but drop our bitter flowers on his grave, and wrap his corpse in such robes of myth as the Emperor himself could not buy.

Mickelrede,
or,
The Slayer and the Staff

A Ghost-Novel by
Avram Davidson
edited, with interpolations, by
Michael Swanwick

Outline in White Girders

Introduction: Here and there and everywhere: AD set out to write a novel and failed to complete it. No surprise in *that.* How many books are begun and not finished? How many stars are in the sky? How many broken hearts on Broadway? Fragments, notes, and a cursory outline, however, he left behind. Enough to provide a taste, a holographic glimpse of what might have been.

I lifted these pages from a box full of such: bits and shards, stories begun and galleons launched for faraway cities of gold; but never, alas, arrived at; nor readily made publishable, alack, any of them. Save this. With a little shuffling and a few speculative additions, I've arranged a construct something like Philadelphia's famous Ghost House, which is a three-dimensional outline in white girders of the long-gone house wherein Benjamin Franklin dwelt, not a reconstruction but a map of our knowledge, and of our ignorance as well.

Here: See, taste, enjoy. In the theater of your mind, reconstruct the whole. AD's ghost-novel is laid before you like a brass horn upon the table; put your ear to its mouth. Let it speak.

Nonmystical Motions of Temperature and Pressure

California: The campus had begun to be shrouded with fog which, seemingly, had ridden on high, mad winds, all the way from the Pacific, past the crag and sea-flung Farallones, over the tide-rushed Golden Gate, across the darkened Bay; before swooping down and settling on the trees and lawns and buildings gathered there on the hills rimming round them. But it was all illusion, Casey Swift knew. The fogs had not ridden in from anywhere—not from the ocean, not from their legendary breeding ground in a particular potato patch in Marin County there north across the straits from Frisco—they were forming right here now in front of his eyes, changing out of one state of vapor invisible into another state of vapor coalescent in response to certain nonmystical motions of temperature and pressure. My doctrine shall drop as the rain, my speech shall distill as the dew.

Along Curved Timelike Arcs

Explication: They are born of course, are the fogs, when worlds collide. Which happens more often than you might think. Every day, on every continent, new timelines are constantly being split off underfoot. The universe reaches an instant in which two outcomes of a choice are equally likely and, in the spirit of a greedy three-year-old confronted with a choice of two equally large slices of cake, reaches for both. But *unlike* the three-year-old, the universe is by this very act ripped in two. The two scion timelines race away from each other along curved timelike arcs of virtual existence that may last anywhere from 2.225 nanoseconds to (in rare cases, admittedly) three weeks before their divergent paths again converge and, like quarreling lovers, they fall into each other's arms, kiss, and are reconciled.

These secret divergences sometimes leave their mark in divergent memories. "You remember the time " you begin, and "It wasn't like that at all!" your Significant Sweetie says. He said, she said. Maybe you're both right.

Maybe not.

Buddhist Beggars with Bowls Outstretched

California: "We're not where we were the last time you were here," he said to the other man in the car. "They finally broke down and gave us the new facilities we asked for."

"The Regents?" asked Dr. Galloway. His ego did not much at all miss the sir but his ears noticed its absence immediately; at the British "redbrick" university where he had spent the recent year it had so invariably been forthcoming that now a sort of visible or auditory lacuna seemed to take shape. He was faintly bothered that he should in any way be bothered by it, so asked the question in whose answer he had no great interest. Facilities were either existent or nonexistent; where they were not, there was not Herbert Galloway. Mildly he pitied the scholars of the permanent faculties, obliged to come like Buddhist beggars with bowls outstretched.

Like a Leopard-Fish or a Moray Eel (I)

Elsewhere: He saw something moving through the star-lit sky, moving oddly, oddly, very oddly, its outlines and its markings as faint as the faintest star. A plane? No plane moved in that curious, sinuous, curving fashion. Nor were birds shaped like that, nor did birds have markings like a leopard-fish or a moray eel.

He stood amazed.

This strange place was an In-Between. It lay in-between times, spaces, dimensions, worlds: by itself and of its own. But it wasn't hermetically sealed. There was a certain seepage not much; enough to have seeded the place with the elements of its present population. A band of women and children who, following too slowly after their men-folk who were hunting down a woolly rhino, took a wrong turn and left the Aurignacian forever. A group of veterans of the Varangian Guard, returning from long service in Byzantium, never reaching their old homes in Norseland. The last of the Martians. Other. Others. And, at length, Casey Swift.

"Do you often just have people stolen like this? Simply for your own use or pleasure or convenience?" Casey asked.

"Of course. Oh, quite often," said the Green King. "With my arcane powers, it's easy." He chuckled fatly.

"Oh. Then uh how come you don't just, well, take over? The Earth, I mean."

The Green King shrugged. "A headache," he said. "Who needs it?"

The Perpetual Oddities of Many Great Men

California: Casey guided the little MG along roads already glistening wet and black, still rather amused that he had only had to go as far as the railroad station and not all the way to the airport to pick Galloway up. Not for the first time he considered the perpetual oddities of many great men: Galloway, for instance, whose professional climate was one in which the jet plane was already as good as obsolete, crossing the continent by train. Casey hadn't even known that the trains, whose rattle and honk he was sometimes aware of as background sounds on quiet nights, still stopped here for passengers at all.

"The Regents, yes," he said; "plus about two and a half rich old alumni who'd been considering the matter for a couple of years. Fortunately the money came through before the enthusiasts started getting enthusiastic and the demonstrators started to demonstrate, or we'd never have seen a penny of it Do you know what I'm talking about? I suppose it must have made the papers over there—people who want the University run by a Committee of Workers, Peasants, and Students."

Galloway watched the fog swallow up a grove of eucalyptus trees. "Your characterization seems a bit severe," he suggested. "Of the Free Speech Movement, I mean."

The Ritualized Politics of Their World

Elsewhere: He took the stuff for kicks, despite the yatatata about "expanding his horizons and perceptions" with which he justified it. Stepping through the jeweled mists he came upon a place frozen still then moving slowly then in full motion. He was In-Between, though he didn't know it yet. Nor did he know that he'd been procured by the Green King to be a gamesman for him: a "slayer." He learned that quite quickly, though.

The Kings did not spend all their time watching games. Politics, the ritualized politics of their world, was their main occupation. They had no actual countries, they had their seats, and outside of them—in province and in city—they worked endlessly, sometimes in alliance, sometimes in enmity, for control. In Iddinan, where the Green King

had a palace, he currently held six places on the council against the nine of the Yellow King and the six divided between three other kings. It was impossible for him to move openly, nakedly, for greater strength. He had to juggle the status quo in a dozen cities and a score of provinces against such factors as his own liberality in holding games and the niggardliness of his current ally, the Yellow. And, always, the great imponderable of the runesmen or redesmen, the Servants of Mickelrede.

The Pediatric Burn Ward

Interpolation: Why would the Green King select an academic to be a slayer? Though AD did not spell out the mechanics of the thing—a trifle, though; any sf writer worth his salt could donkey it up—R. Caswell Swift was chosen for his deep knowledge of probability theory, which will prove decisive to his meteoric rise through training to stardom as a gamesman. Never particularly physical, much less the object of popular adulation, Casey will experience the heady intoxication of the intellectual who finds himself magically transformed into a jock.

But every self-absorbed hero needs a wake-up call. I'll let Casey's be a post-coital conversation with a woman of affordable virtue (provided him by a grateful home-team booster), who lets drop the info that *this* particular gig is, among whores, just about as popular as assignment to the Pediatric Burn Ward is among nurses. Soon as you get attached to one, she says, he dies.

For the first time, Casey applies his mathematical insights to the game *as a whole,* and sees what should have been blindingly obvious all along: it's a zero-sum game, a rigged wheel. For every winner, there's a loser. For every game, so many deaths. As an individual gamesman, he's doing fine; as a statistical gamesman he's already half-dead.

A Tiger by the Tail

California: The younger man laughed—not scornfully—said, "Oh, I suppose they would run the store about as well as the Regents and the two and a half rich old alumni who run it now. Differently, of course, but no worse. I frankly don't care. I'm like the Vicar of Bray We park here." He showed something in his wallet to the attendant, slid the car smoothly into the space between the white lines, briefly displayed the items in the wallet to Galloway. "My neck-verses," he commented, grinning. And got out and walked away.

Such frankness might well be disarming had I arrived armed, Galloway thought. Young Swift's British equivalent would surely have gone around and opened the door for the newly-arrived savant. But then he wouldn't have had a car of his own to drive. Anyway, it was an attempt to compare incomparable categories. Mr. Caswell Swift had no foreign equivalents. It didn't matter. The junior must be competent enough, or Brannard wouldn't have him. And it was only competence that counted. Galloway got out of the little car and followed. He wanted to meet Brannard again after all this time, but even more than that he wanted to see for himself something of what Brannard had been doing here. He wanted this so much he could almost taste it. Time enough after for trifles like his baggage, where he was going to stay, or washing after his journey.

I've got a tiger by the tail, Brannard had written; and I don't know whether it's going to turn out to be a camera or a cannon. Maybe you'll know. Somebody had damned well better.

Things Afar Off

Elsewhere: Casey, doing his own juggling, heard of the redesmen. Heard, too, of Mickelrede, the great, holy, and numinous rune-stave, the source of all knowledge. Including technical knowledge. For this world did have its technology. There were firearms, forges, mills, engines There was a science, a science sealed. Not for a while did Casey realize that he had to break the seal. Much more to the immediate moment was learning to handle the lance and the sword and the other implements of the games; that the users of local technology did not stand as employers vis-à-vis the technicians, that the technicians were redesmen, consulted like oracles—he pieced this together later.

The world of the gamesmen was abrupt, a mixture of brutality, cunning, vainglory—and occasional sparks of love and mercy. True, one of his fellow-gladiators, surprising Casey in the chance act of scribbling in the sand, then and forever after insisted that Casey was—must be—an outcast redesman. Other than such odd bits, the Servants of Great Mickelrede remained as vague in Swift's mind as the Jacks o' the North: rulebreakers, these: rebels, raveners, rabble, rioters, owing fay to no king, no color. Things afar off

As Though She Had Invented Them

California: Coming out of the mist and fog as though she had invented them Casey Swift saw the girl the same second she saw him; he looked at her straight on, but she only peeped at him out of the corners of her eyes as she went on along, perhaps not quite so serenely self-pleased now. Llewellyn Thompson, or so she incredibly called herself—perhaps she was really so, officially and actually, a product of the creeping custom of giving male names to female children, although with the increasing emancipation of the masculine sex little boys might soon enough find themselves being christened Margaret or Mary. Likelier, though, Miss Thompson had merely co-opted to become Llewellyn as part of her own personal make-yourself-more-interesting program. Casey Swift, in a burst of anger which had surprised him as much as it could have her, had once told her that "Sadie" would go much better with her last name than any other. It had flown straight home, too, and she showed it whenever she met him; but of course that didn't do Joe Foyle any good. Not a bit of good.

Because Joe Foyle had gone right to pot when Llewellyn T. began putting him through the wringer. Joe Foyle had flunked out, been fired, rusticated, sent down. And had in consequence lost his neck-verses and was semi-immediately conscripted and sent to East Iridium or some such hellhole rich in bullets and beriberi and where the West Iridiumese were now trying to blow his ass off, which had been made for better things.

Casey was damned sorry for Joe, but he was (he felt) manageably sorry, which meant being damned sure not to make the same mistake. No medieval student was ever more careful of the scrap of parchment bearing a Latin verse or two of the Psalms, ability to read which would obtain him benefit of clerical privilege if accused of any of the many capital offenses and thus save his neck from the gallows or the block (hence "neck-verses"), than Casey Swift was of the card which declared him a graduate student in physics or the card which stated his consequentially deferred draft status. He fooled around with girls, true; he drank on occasion unto merriment, true; he fenced and skied and swam in due season, true. But he never allowed any of these things, or any other things, to bring down his marks by a hair or a minus-sign. He avoided political activity not only of the far right or of the far left but of the bland and ever-

shifting center as well. You never knew. There were only a few years to carry him beyond draft age and into some well-furnished and well-paying corporation lab of the sort which was always so roomy along its constantly expanding sides as to make the presence or absence of room at the top a matter of indifferent definition only.

The Annual Free and Folly

Elsewhere: The tricorn crouched in the shadow almost beneath the Royal Seat and it glared and it growled. The slayer held out his lance, shaft under armpit, and hissed invitingly. His free hand swung loose in an almost effeminate gesture. But it never swung very far from the short sword in the short scabbard. And then the tricorn charged.

Oh, it was an episode only an episode. Of more import were those previously-mentioned Things afar off Which abruptly came close without pausing to be merely closer. For it was Jack-wards that Casey and his small group of fellows headed after their escape from the barracks-lodge during the annual Free and Folly.

For the Jacks were on the move again. And so, Casey learned, was Mickelrede. Moved to avoid capture, it was nevertheless captured. Freed. Re-captured. Experience, though brief, with the Jacks o' the North had convinced Casey Swift of two things: One, that they were no mere rabble. Two, that they were not for him, whatever they were. Things might be no better with the redesmen, but he had to try them and see.

Bandy-Legged and Heavy of Brow

Interpolation: The Jacks o' the North are only vaguely described in the 60 grams of typescript (14 pp., xerographed, cover page and two variantly annotated copies of page 1 inclusive) that AD left behind. Presumably he was saving the fun of creating them for that happy day when he held a living contract in his hand.

So I shall insert six tyrants seated upon seven thrones (one empty), who command the absolute allegiance of all Jacks. They are large and brooding creatures, bandy-legged and heavy of brow, capacious of skull and yet lacking the high foreheads we ourselves rejoice in: Neanderthalers. They are also, through a process that will be explained later, immortal.

Bestial, apish, and cunning, the Six (once they were Seven; one died, and is still mourned) have gathered together the runaways and renegades of In-Between and imposed upon them discipline and some mocking semblance of social order. Their ultimate objective is to avenge themselves upon the species that killed off all their kind but they Six—the human race.

To exterminate the brutes.

Experimental Drugs of an Illicit Nature

California: Needless to say that Mr. Casey Swift never but never indulged in exotic herbs or experimental drugs of an illicit nature. He was heart and soul of the opinion of that noted jazz musician whose comment on the alleged innocuousness of such substances was, "What do you mean, 'What can it do to you?' It can put you in jail, that's what it can do to you!"

Quaint and Curious in its Fashioning

Elsewhere: The Great Rune-Stave had been carried off again from captivity, and had passed across The Gap, where no Jacks dared follow the bridge. Small wonder! Who, unprotected by runish magic, would venture to set foot upon a causeway that the winds palpably blew through, the stones of which were so unsolid as to be transparent? But Casey disbelieved in magic. All chance is but direction which thou canst not see. He believed that.

The bridge materialized beneath his feet, revealing the simple fact that his bodily presence polarized its molecules into solidity. The runesmen had vanished into the darks and snows by the time he crossed the gap, but he kept on. He wanted them now more than ever. For, if they could do this, then—surely—they could get him out of In-Between. And home again.

The awe of Mickelrede was great upon the land. But the plain people did not understand why it didn't simply destroy the Jacks. And the Jacks, having found—when they'd had it—that they could not use it: had come over to a half-don't-believe-in-it state there was a serious chance they might destroy it.

They caught up with it again about the time Casey did. The fight was hot and close—so close that Casey, fighting hard and side by side with the runesmen, caught a glimpse of the thing when its cov-

side with the runesmen, caught a glimpse of the thing when its covering robes were momentarily torn away. And in that second he knew what it was. Mickelrede. "Great Counsel." The Great Rune-Stave, the foundation of wisdom and power and technology. It was a slide rule! The size of a man, quaint and curious in its fashioning—but a slide rule!

Creator of the Stacked Equations

Interpolation: If it were written, 'twere well it were written quickly. Nothing ages so fast as science fiction, and, having hesitated, there surely came a moment when AD realized that his fractional novel, partially prosed and roughly outlined, was never going to be written. That damned slide-rule! "Mickelrede" was written some thirty-five years ago on a manual typewriter, in those long ago halcyon days before personal computers crept into our homes and onto our laps to gladden and magnify our lives. At some point the very notion of an all-powerful slide-rule became ridiculous. Cumbersome. An embarrassment. Yet it was central to the plot. Excise it and all that depended upon it, and what remained? Damned little, sir. Very little more than what fuels your standard fantasy-unit (*Book One,* let us say, of the *First Nounword Trilogy* of *Ye Encyklopedia of Magycke*) today.

And yet. And yet

Suppose it were not *precisely* a slide-rule, but rather something akin to Babbage's stillborn yet demonstrably workable difference engine? (Which same gizmo was employed in Gibson and Sterling's *The Difference Engine.* But they were not the first to bring it to public attention. Nor will they be the last.) Imagine a device of gleaming, intermeshing brass gears—a primitive cruncher of numbers, a hand-cranked equation mill.

Such a device would need an operator, a programmer. And—since the invention and loss of such a technological chimera *twice* in human history is a monstrosity of unlikelihood so great as to derail even the most gullible reader—let that programmer be somebody connected to Babbage's folly: Ada Byron, the daughter of the more famous George Gordon, Lord Byron, and creator of the stacked equations upon which the difference engine would have run, had its inventor only the sense to refrain from making improvements before the bloody thing was finished.

Ada makes a particularly attractive heroine: a genius, a programmer, and beautiful to boot. And—since her personal history is quite adequately documented and it is known (or can easily be ascertained) that she did *not* fade softly and silently away from the world as we know it—let her be a mirror-Ada. A duplicate and splitting-away of the original such as can only occur under special conditions, when the deviating timelike arcs of quantum reality *never* reunite to cancel out their differences.

I'll also postulate—why not?—that by the nature of the event, Ada was made immortal, just as the Six (once Seven) were, before her. That the redesmen have elevated her in rank to a kind of priestess. And that Casey Swift falls in love with her.

The Crash of Matter and the Wrack of Worlds

California: So there he was, Richard Caswell Swift, white, American, male, early middle twenties in age, calm in spirit and sound in health, well-adjusted and well-contented; dusty-brown-blond of hair and modestly brown of eye, muscled without being muscle-bound, too fond of himself to spare much of him for others but canny enough not to spare none. It was, he thought, another stroke of luck that he was able to feel an interest in his work as a research assistant to Professor Brannard quite in addition to its utility for him in his own plans for himself. Not that he would have devoted less care and effort to it had it not been so. His work and studies dealt with "the crash of matter and the wrack of worlds" but he would have pursued them just as diligently had they been concerned with the statistics of industrial lard rendering.

Time and Anti-Time

California: Sometimes, more often than he was perhaps aware of, Dr. Galloway, that peripatetic natural philosopher, considered that he did not like fluorescent lighting. It was, he considered, as noisy as gaslight though less warm. Now, however, as he half-sat and half-crouched, talking to his old friend and current colleague, Jack Brannard, it would have made no difference if the lab had been illuminated by slut-lamps or neon signs.

Two-dimensional mirrors, i.e., our mirrors, leave out a dimension: depth. Is there a mirror which shows three dimensions? Yes—a mov-

ing picture film projected will show length, breadth, and time. But this is still losing one dimension: again, depth. A mirror which does display three dimensions is still leaving out one dimension, i.e., time.

Dr. Brannard had built a sort of shadow-box or cloud-chamber which shows length, width, and depth—but not time: Action is in it suspended. It had some semblance or relation to a hologram, in which one can "look around the tree and see the man behind it." Still, it was not the same thing: no.

But then Casey poked or was pushed or fell into the box/chamber (an accident, seemingly, though not in reality), turned silvery/opalescent around the edges, appeared flat and one-dimensional: vanished. The scene vanished. Casey Swift's clothes were left behind. Witnesses assumed he was in all probability annihilated by the intraposition of time and anti-time.

The Status of Mechanics

Elsewhere: He found the redesmen, battle over, and his knowledge confided to them, not about to pop with joy over him. It was certainly no matter of, "You who know the Secret are therefore of us." Contrariwise. They were sour, suspicious. Unauthorized knowledge. Bad show. What does the County Medical Association do about an outsider who can perform appendectomies? Warn him he'd damnwell better not.

In a way, he had finally broken the seal. He found the scientists reduced to the status of mechanics—in one way. Enhanced to the status of priests—in another. Obliged to treat with barbarians and tyrants to uphold the status quo or, actually, to drag it backwards. Were they actually withdrawing devices, one by one? Why? Or were the devices merely falling from their failing grasp? Civilization sliding slowly backwards while the Servants of Mickelrede encouraged the petty kings to occupy themselves with games and petty wars? The Chief of the Servants should have been able to tell Casey. But it wasn't protocol even to put the question. Would (for example) the Pope see some tatterdemalion jackleg infidel who claimed to know all about transubstantiation? Not likely. But suppose that same also claimed to know where the bones of St. Peter lay

Casey saw him, he saw Casey, and he saw through Casey. Who, he flatly said, was a menace. With Swift's dangerous knowledge, all

Hell could break loose. Only when things in In-Between reached a low enough level, technologically, and there remained indefinitely, would there be hope of beginning to achieve moral improvements to provide a truly safe base for future physical advances. Against that day the Servants of Mickelrede would preserve their knowledge the basis of which was the use of that instrument without which pre-computer technology is impossible. And thereunto they, in times before, captured Mickelrede in order to keep their world from the plunder and ravishment of industrialism, doling out its knowledge carefully, grudgingly. To all of this, Casey represented a threat.

With Chintz Curtains and a Pianoforte

Interpolation: The miracle-bait AD had in mind for Casey to employ was Mickelrede's location. But I'm going to do a little bait-and-switch here, and posit that Casey knows where Ada Byron, long believed slain, is being held prisoner.

My own impulse would be to place her in a stone tower amid the cold vapors of some Ultimate dim Thule. Someplace archetypal. AD, I suspect, would more likely ensconce her in a comfortable suite of rooms, with chintz curtains and a pianoforte, warded by a gaoler who, while unbribable, can yet discuss Aeschylus and Calculus in the original Greek equations.

So: Let it be both: In a stone tower in the cold North in a well-appointed room does Ada languish, whose single door is barred by a warden of perfect culture and bestial appearance: one of the Six.

Casey tells of seeing Ada in the heated hand-to-hand fight for Mickelrede. He does not mention (so conflicted are his feelings: of loathing, of love) that her face is familiar to him from of old, for he has seen her before. Many times. In California. As Llewellyn—sometimes "Sadie"—Thompson. A girl who has been known to come out of the mist and fog as though she had invented them.

All Was Still and Motionless

Neither Here nor There: He felt himself as though prisoned within a dream, and, as within a dream or nightmare (though otherwise there was nothing of the nightmare about it) when one knows or partly knows that the paralysis is of the same stuff as the dream and thus one by main effort forces motion upon the body, slowly, slowly,

weighted down by some devilish and stifling gravity—so, that way, equally slowly, by heavy effort and with heavy weight opposing him, he forced himself to move. And as though the scene itself responded to his effort and was somehow acted upon and released by it, so, slowly, slowly, the scene melted into action.

He felt a puff of slow, sluggish air upon his skin. He saw

Great glittering gouts of moisture hung from the strange mosses pendant from the stranger trees and refracted, diamond-like or crystalline, glittering and glowing. And yet no sun was visible as the source of this bejeweled light, but all was obscured by wraiths and shreds of mist. The great peacock-like birds stood on one leg each, the other leg drawn up body-close with foot dangling foppishly, tails partly unfanned in a display of brilliant color and fantastic design totally unearthly. The flock of white birds with crimson bills and scarlet feet and carmine pinion-plumes remained fixed and hovering in middle air and middle distance. The stand of flowers bowed their golden heads. The man in the strange green habit still inclined his head and still beckoned with his hand and finger. And all was still and motionless.

A Multitude of King Storks

Elsewhere: But the Jacks o' the North represented a greater menace: a multitude of King Storks against the status quo of the petty few King Logs: Casey might (if allowed) tip the molten mixture out of the caldron before the mold was fixed. But the Jacks would destroy caldron and mixture and furnace and all. No safe, controlled descent towards watchful waiting. All-destroying savagery, instead. And Casey offered a package deal. Cancel his status as the chattel of the Green King, agree to return him whence he came, back him up all along the line—and he would rid them of the Jacks o' the North.

But This Was Long Ago and Far Away

Neither Here nor There: Once, the only single once (but that was in another country), as one of a tiny company among whom the sacred cigarette with the greenish herb which was not tobacco circulated from hand to hand and mouth to mouth like a sacrament around the candlepoint of light in the darkness, and then, later, floating upon the sweet sea of euphoria (but this was long ago and far away and besides, the lad was young), something else began to happen to him.

Time ceased to exist. That which he had just said, he had never said; that which he had just said, he had always been saying; that which he had just said, he was yet to say. He saw his words as though embossed on sand, he saw them vanish away as though absorbed in sand. Nothing happened, everything was about to happen, action was distilled into inaction, inaction was pregnant with action.

Something not at all the same as that but yet inescapably reminiscent of that was in this strange compelling silently unmoving scene which drew and had drawn him in. Amazement still held him in thrall but now present was the sudden element of terror. Was he to remain here fixed and unmoving forever, another motionless figure in this scene neither living nor dead?

Did He Inhale?

Exegesis: Did Casey smoke dope? And if he did, was it only once and long ago? Or was it often and recently? Did he inhale? Was it dope that brought him to the In-Between? Or was it the good Doctor Brannard's ghost box? The Green King summoned him—would it have profited him one whit, had he steered a wide course of drugs and hard physics?

The simplest demonstrable mindfuck in physics is the experiment in which a beam of light is revealed to be either wavelike or particulate in nature—whichever one the experimenter chooses. After which, and called upon to explain themselves, scientists split the difference and call it a "wavicle."

AD didn't bother being consistent with the mechanism that swept Casey out of reality as we know it altogether, because it was a negligible matter, what Alexander Pope called the *Machinery:* that Part which the Deities, Angels, or Daemons (or Scientists) were to play in the matter. Calling upon Deities, Angels, Daemons, or Scientists to do your enabling for you, is to admit that it cannot be done by sensible means.

Besides, I like the thought that the story itself partakes of quantum uncertainty. Two plots diverge and race away from each other on timelike arcs, only to meet again somewhere In-Between.

Let's not reconcile them.

Thumbs Were Pricked and Squeezed

Elsewhere: The Battle of the Plains of Quore had been of the illustrious and classical kind. Arquebusiers in black-and-gold, arquebusiers in red-

and-gold, had filed and defiled to the music of drums and trumpets and oboes until they were within fire-shot of each other. Then the heralds had stepped forward, and the augurs. Thumbs were pricked and squeezed, blood was ceremoniously declared to have been shed, both sides were asked to accept this as sufficient. Both sides ceremoniously refused. The black and white bones were cast, the omens taken, the choice of first fire given and accepted. Heralds and augurs retired, walking backwards. Fifteen volleys were exchanged, the side with the fewest men then standing was adjudged to have lost and was permitted to retire with its wounded and its banners. Commissioners presently followed to accept its change of rule. Thus, the battle; thus the war.

But this newest and latest battle by the Jacks o' the North against the Seat of the King of the Yellow was something else again. The attack had actually occurred in the night! without heralds! without augurs! without warning—! The comment most frequently quoted was the Yellow King's, "This isn't war, this is chaos." However, as he had said it in exile and defeat, it was doubtful if his was the ultimate and definitive comment after all.

The chessboard "armies" of the Kings of the Colors were worthless in this new kind of warfare. But there was another body of disciplined fighters: the gamesmen. The slayers.

She Who Programs

Interpolation: The narrative seems to have lost sight of Ada: our heroine: She Who Programs. She is nobody to lose sight of. Too, there are no surprises in the late synopsis, and AD was a writer of ample and commodious surprises, the ground shifting underfoot, revelation abruptly veering into the Unknown. AD was saving his inventions for the actual writing. I, perforce, cannot wait that long.

What is she doing in her well-appointed room in that stone tower in the Nordmost north of the frozen North? Her guardian watches over her, enamored and ignorant of his own infatuation (for it has been so long since the last female of his kind died that he has forgotten what that state *feels like*), and even he, shrewdest of anthropoids, does not know. To what purpose do her nimble fingers trip so lightly over the brass mill of fate, the cog-wheeled decoder of runes, which y-clept Mickelrede?

Weaving.

The brass gears and teeth of the mighty difference engine spin under her hands, and she looks upon their permutations with cool and knowing eyes. Which device she had tricked and politicked the Six into capturing for her. To what purposes does this warrior-faced woman, this chill and cerebral immortal, this long-experienced and deep-thinking minder of her own counsels weave?

Why, to her own, of course.

The Hand That Binds

Elsewhere: A faction within the runesmen warned Casey Swift that the Chief could not be depended on—that, in fact, the greater Swift's success, the less likely the Chief was to be dependable.

But Casey was not actually aiming all this at the Chief. He was aiming it at the Green King. The hand that binds is the hand that loosens. Cunning king, would he want the balance of power entirely thrown up for grabs by the total destruction of the Jacks? Not bloody likely. And it was he, after all, who had had Casey brought to the world of In-Between in the first place.

Time passed. Events occurred.

The slayers and their new commander had driven the Jacks back into the very frosts and snows of the wild North. And then it was, as he knew it must be, that Casey saw the ignorant armies slow to a crawl then go stiff and rigid and all motion cease

And back he went through the jeweled mists and into the cortex of his own old body once again. Forever. Forever? Perhaps not forever

For hers is the hand that loosens
And hers is the hand that binds
Hers is the hand that releases
And hers is the hand that winds

Like a Leopard-Fish or a Moray Eel (II)

Envoi: "The idea for this came to me one night in 1963 in Berkeley Cal. when in the near night sky I saw an unexplained aerial phenomenon like a moray eel or a leopard shark. Not sure why I never finished this, it looked real good at the time. It was to have involved gladiators, probability theory, and the slide rule. Chee."

—A.D. Oct. 2/76

Vergil Magus: King Without Country

by

Michael Swanwick and Avram Davidson

Emericho, Count Mar, Master of the Ceremonies to the Emperor.

Oria, Countess Mar, Wife to the Master of the Ceremonies to the Emperor.

Count Mar came from a very high and noble family indeed, and was indeed the last of his line. There had indeed been one sole cousin, an heir to the shrunken meadows and the crumbling chastel and to the very many honors, privileges, and titles. And when he had in fact died in battle against distant barbarians so barbarous and so distant that even Count Mar as a historian of war had never even heard of them (*Turks*, they were called. They were called *Turks*. And it was assumed that now that the Sub-commander of a Legion the Knight and Patriarch Ser Audulen Mar had given his life to defeat them, that they had slunk back into the wild wastes from which they had come, and would never again be heard of. Whence? That heartland of Asia More, Bactria Extra Oxum or some such syllables and babblement. *Turks*!), Count Mar had set up an altar and burned balsamum and myrrh. Himself the August Caesar had attended, as well as members of the *Old* Aristocracy. Which excluded those ennobled during the last seven reigns, or, rather, their descendents … unless said descendents were also descended from the *Old* Aristocracy. And everyone remarked how straight and erect had been Emericho Mar, the Count Mar, the Master of the Ceremonies at the Imperial Court, at the Court Imperial.

No one knew that afterwards, all the servants sent away except that one servitor as old as the Count Mar and in fact his bastard brother by a gardening-maid, no one knew that the Emperor's Master of Ceremonies had put his face upon his arms and wept aloud: not because of an especial fondness for the Sub-commander Ser Audulen Mar, whom he had never seen, nor had he ever seen his Father: but because the ancient and noble House of Mar had all but come to an end. The contents of the chastel might he leave as he would, but the chastel itself and the meadows at which grazed a flock of grizzled sheep of a race seen nowhere else, these would in no great time become escheat to the Crown Imperial, and the Emperor might do with them as he would.

House Mar: no more.

Vergil wiped the blood from the blade of his dagger, and set it aside. Carefully, he splayed the dove's intestines and read the signs: Audacibus annue coeptis. *Be favorable to bold beginnings.*

He laughed and clapped his hands. The portents, horoscopes and auspices all agreed. This would be a marvelous day for the great work.

Which visible display of cheer should have spread quickly through the workshop major. Odd that it did not. There were a dozen workmen employed in various aspects of the Great Labor and though every man set to his task with a will, they exchanged many a nervous and even dark glance. They were all on edge. They would turn hastily away at his approach, as if there were something about his clothes or his appearance or his shadow that displeased them. Yet so good was their discipline that no one did speak a word to him. Not so much as boo.

None except the Chinese wizard Ma.

Ma came trotting up to him and with puppyish eagerness, said, "Great sir, stop. You are being superstition. Consider the sky. Consider the winds. Consider all life. Instead of kill birds, you must throw coins, separate yarrow stalks, consult *Book of*—" And then stopped, chagrined, because the tome whose divinatory authority he was about to (and, it might be added, far from the first time) call upon was not in his immediate possession. It had been some time, indeed, since he had last seen it. He was beginning to think he had left it behind. In his study. In Tai-Ting.

"Rest assured, my young colleague," Vergil said, "that Roman science is quite advanced in the area of Prediction. Why don't you go help out Oria in the workshop minor?" He was feeling particularly tolerant today. The signs were as good as he'd ever seen them. With such omens, absolutely nothing could possibly go wrong.

Also, as a scholar himself, he understood the pain of misplacing a book.

But Ma only shook his head pityingly, and thrust his hands each up the opposite sleeve of his tunic. When he was in such a mood there was nothing to do but ignore him.

The Chinese wizard had come to Vergil, as so many things did, as a gift. Technically speaking, he was a gift to the Emperor from the Great Cham the Son of Heaven, Conqueror of Hind, Tibet, Java Major and Minor (any day now, the deed was as good as done), Benevolent and Absolute Sovereign of the Middle Lands, a.k.a. Cathay, Qara-Khita, Greater Meng-tse, Serica, the Land of Silk, et cetera and cetera, amen. Who had heard distant reports of his beloved cousin's glory and so sent, along with his compliments, a caravan of presents, including jugglers, carvers-of-ivory-balls, tigers, elephants, book-printing machines and mechanics to operate them, blackpowderers, kite-makers, fireworks artisans, and the odd inconvenient lateral heir to the throne itself, to say nothing of robes of hyacinth-purple silk, bolts of fine scarlet cloth, sandalwood casks of emeralds y-carven with Zodiacal ideograms, hempen sacks of peppercorns from Malabar and Tellicherry, cinnamon from Ceylon, brocades from the Isle of Lanka and dragon's blood from Serendip, oh really the entire catalog is too tedious for recital. Let it be said: Munificent.

So the caravan set out for Rome. Past the Great Wall. Past the Gobi Desert. Over the cold Pamirs. Past the frozen and lofty Himalyas. Over the Oxus and the Jaxartes Rivers. Under the shadow of the Great Stone Tower. Across the waters of the Caspian Sea, heavy with sturgeon and epsom salts. Along the winter coasts of the Black Sea. Over the bars and shallows of the Indus with its ship-killing tides. Through the burning waters of the Erythraean Sea. Skirting first the crocodile-ridden lands of Gog and Magog, and then the hashish-beautiful lands of the Old Man of the Mountains and so to Babylon and past the ruined stump of Babel's tower and then Byzantium and … well, it was a long trip.

At the end of which Ma, with his thousand-drawered pothecary chest, was the sole survivor to prostrate himself before the throne and offer the Chinese Emperor's fondest compliments to his cousin, the King in Rome.

The King in Rome.

Caught ye that? as the Emperor would say. King *in* Rome, which was as good as to imply nowhere *outside* of Rome. It was a calculated insult. No sooner were the fatal words were out of the politically innocent (to say nothing of pig-ignorant) Chinese wizard's mouth, than the court generals bristled and clapped hands to swords, ancestral memories of martial glory kicking up dust in their ancient skulls, and prepared for the clarion call to a senseless decade or two of yet another ruinous land-war in Asia.

But Good King Festus, as the denizens of the war-foddering classes were wont to call him, when they thought of him at all, which was—let's be honest—not all that often, Festus as we began to say, had an original and straightforward mind. He knew how to make trouble disappear with a word. "No, no, dear child," he said with a dismissive flick of the fingers. "I am the King *of* Rome. You want the King *in* Rome, which would be …" He consulted with an advisor. "Vergil. King Vergil, on the Street of Mages. Down the via and second left, you can't miss it."

And so the bewildered but ever-loyal-to-his-Emperor's-command little wizard had come trotting down the yellow brick streets of Rome and into Vergil's life.

"It's going to explode!" the bellows-boy screamed.

The apparatus was a combination of pelican and sublimatory. Which is to say that the furnace had an iron bar running transversely through it just below the thick glass pelican (thus regulating temperature) and a perforated disk above that which held the glass vessel in place and vented the hot gases from the furnace. The pelican had two looping necks that returned the distillate to its residue for redistillation. Which process—called cohobation—might recur some five hundred times before a state of absolute purification was achieved.

Cohobation. An unlovely word. And yet …

An emerald through cohobation might improve its water threefold, though it were cheaper to simply buy a finer stone.

A base metal such as lead could, through cohobation, be improved into gold at a cost not *many* times greater than the value of the gold.

A certain Tincture through cohobation could be so clarified as to extend life—and in perfect health! no sibylline ironies *here!*—for so long as to be … well, indefinite. And no price was too great for that.

If one succeeded.

If the apparatus did not explode and kill everyone in the laboratory first.

The prevention of which catastrophe lay not in spells, talismans, and the employment of minor demons, but in regulation, constancy, a discerning eye. Watchfulness! While his laboratorians labored in silence, Vergil stood unblinking (those who mistook the sorcerer's stare for aught other than simple and absolute attentiveness, who indeed found it downright *spooky*, were simply misinformed) and motionless. He held in his mind and at the tip of his tongue a cantrip for the regulation of the heat. Apprentice smiths extended long spoons (called "devil-suppers") into the flames, each spoon containing a liquid that would bubble, steam, or sublime at a different known temperature. So that when a gust of wind coming through the laboratory door caused the flames to rise and hotten, Vergil was ready.

He spoke a certain Word.

With a *whoosh*, the flames leaped toward the ceiling beams. White-hot they were, far hotter than could be explained by any natural process. Hot almost as that Red Man whom Vergil had confronted (and fought; and defeated) in the deserts of Lybya. Insanely hot. Magically hot.

"It's going to explode!" the bellows-boy screamed.

All stood frozen with horror.

Save Ma, who stepped forward and calmly poured a sack of salt over the flames.

With appropriate sputterings and smokings and belchings of stinks, the flames subsided. "What a mess!" exclaimed Petronius, his blacksmith-general. "What a damnable mess."

Vergil, though outwardly composed, was disposed to agree. His contrivances, to say nothing of his cantrips, had been of the best—he was sure of that—and the auspices had been perfect. Yet it was his application of a spell to regulate the heat which had caused the flames to flare up so alarmingly. Which spell he had successfully applied an hundred times. Why had this happened?

What could possibly have gone wrong?

How?

The Emperor had given no thought to what he would do with the escheats of House Mar, as, well, why should he? Grizzled sheep, shrunken meadows, stone-cankered chastel, *pah!*, more trouble to rid oneself of than worth the getting (at least if one were as rich as—but who was?—his most August and Imperial self). But he had given a somedel thought as to what he would do with the Count Mar.

There was indeed an Empress, she came not to Court. Never? Indeed, never. She had been a camp-follower when the Sovereign, then a soldier of the line, took it into his head to marry her. She made a good-enough wife for those days, but those days were far off; the ways of court were not the ways of Petronella, Empress of all the Roman World, known generally as Aunt Pet to the hordes of nephews nieces, ancient uncles, aged aunts, scraggy sisters, be-bent-over brothers, scrannel cousins, and all the rest of them over whom she was Empress; giving orders, handing out favors, throwing largesses of cheap coins and cheaper sweets: it pleased them, it delighted her, there she stayed, in her town of origin, received she allowances, came she never up to Rome.

Or any else where the Emperor might be encamped.

Save that once a year or so they did meet, both incognito, at a small farmhouse in the Libertiex of Etruscany. Conversation might go rather like this:

"Hast everything tha needs, Petsy?"

"Yes, Festus. Mother has tooken it into her head, she must have a closed litter, such a nonsense; 'What's thee wants ith such a thing,' I have asked her. 'Wants to crawl into it to scratch me tits, it's not befitten for the Emprey's mamm-in-law to do it fore the world!'" The Empress guffawed, showing missing teeth and present stumps.

"I'll have it sent. Does any bother thee?"

"Nay. They dasn't. Do they feed Us well at Court?"

"Too well. But there. Such is the nature of the camp. Hast any petitions or positions wanted or pointments made?"

The Empress stretched towards a basket, failed, quite, to reach it. Was the Empress ... *fat* ...? Foolish question. Members of the August House are never *fat*. But sometimes they are large and comely. The Emperor fetched the basket up himself. "I've made some lists." *Had some made, I being ignorant of book*, went without saying.

"I'll bineby have a look. What's this, thy puppy dog?"

"I must always have one such. Going away, is thee, Festy?"

"Aye. Here's some Roman sauce and sausage for thee. If tha but somedel needs, send a word. If any durst vex thee, squat and cuck upon them. *Vale*, then." A brief embrace. Nothing more. Would be false.

Oria emerged from the lesser workshop, glass mask yet in her begloved hand. The mask was a protection against the caustics and mordants employed in alchemy, such as might threaten her perfect and most *valuable* complexion.

Setting the mask carelessly aside, she rushed into the workshop major, past the bellows-boy cursing and slapping at spark burns on his arms, to clutch Vergil's hands and peer anxiously up into his eyes.

"Countess," he said.

She dimpled with pleasure, as she always did when someone of quality had the courtesy to employ her proper and supposed title. Her face aglow with excitement, eyes large. A beautiful, beautiful woman was Oria.

Vacuous as three days in Gaul, but beauteous nonetheless.

What wanted she with Vergil? What did any attractive young woman with political entanglements—a dozen such he turned away from his door in a week—desire?

Aphrodisiacs.

Aphrodisiacs and fertility drugs.

Yet here was the curious fact that those who most required a love philtre were they who could least afford that knowledge be made public. It was the potion which dared not speak its name. As well ask for extract of pennyroyal to undo an unseemly swelling in the stomach! 'Twould get out.

No more did a mage of serious aspirations desire a reputation of being willing to provide such potions. There were spirits to conjure up and demons to put down. Discoveries to be made and most dire secrets to be kept. Who had the time? Life was short, alas. Life was short.

All of which led to the fastidious young Oria, with such connections as would compel cooperation from anybody, even a King Without Country, prenticing herself three mornings of the week as a pharmecary-in-training. Solely for the love of learning, to be sure. Oh, la! How she did swoon to distill and compound.

And Vergil, who was a compassionate man, had set her to learn the basics of distilling perfumes from the liqueurs of flowers and compounding ochres and vermilion for the ornamentation of the skin. She would tire of the sport, soon enough. 'Twere cruelty not to let her get from it something she'd value.

Oh, and by the bye: *don't* teach her to prepare any poisons. Oria gaped about the shambled laboratory, blinking most prettily and simultaneously pretending not to notice the admiring glances of the workmen. It was an act of great social dexterity, one that not just *every* girl could have managed. "Who was your friend?" Oria asked, and then, "Why did he leave so suddenly?"

Ma gestured helpfully toward the door. "He go that way," he said eagerly. "Down street." Misunderstanding, as usual, the question.

"Friend?" Vergil asked blankly.

"The Black Man. Who *was* he?"

Thus far, then: the Empress. Every day for a break-the-fast she had a specially-baked white bread with honey, until her twenty-fifth year she had never even *tast*ed white bread. Everyday for a nonetide muncheon they brought her a fresh-made sausage of kid's flesh and veal with an abundance of onions, leeks, and garlic; she eat it boiled, with a sauce of must of yellow wine and sharp yellow spice-seed ground fine: fennel often as well. And for her supper every night they gave her a fine dish of pullets and capons and cockles also boiled, with the broth: more onions, more garlic, and carrots and parsley and weed of dill. Petronella was greatly fond of this broth and drank it loudly with frequent eructations. The fowls she pulled apart and fed bits of to her preternaturally old crone Mother and gave out larger hunks and chunks to her kin— *Eat this fine wingy, Auntie Ara.* Ah, what a tender pi'ce it be, a grace upon thy pudenda, niecey mine! A num a num! *That's what it's here for … let me pull thee off this bump of arse, so, ope thy gob*— Also His Imperial Majesty by Verteu of the Coinage Right each month had her sent five vast leathern baggs a-full of specially-minted stiverkins with her own picture on one side for those who couldnae read the motto *Petronella Empratrix.* These she scattered day by day, grinning and chuckling: for this had she humped her hucklebones to many a grizzled decurion before the Festus had come to take her in marriage, for this had she brakked the ice on a muckle mountain pools and washed the Legions' filthy clothes. For this she had marched with cracked and bleed-

ing toes many marches on far frontiers, weaving counter-spells against the frightful fearful witcheries of the Petchenegs and the Galicians and the Picts, the Sassenags and Scotes; rolled along the great wrought-iron kettle when the very ass-of-burden had perished with the cold in Northern Dace a-nigh the savage Geats, and therein had she cooked the Soldiery their stolen grain and stewed their plundered porks.

Her present life as Empress of a rude valley full of ruder peasant-kin? She loved it. She a-grudged The Festus nought. The Roman King, the Roman Roy, the King over all the Kings, His Splendor the Selected Emperor of all the Roman World? Nought. She begrudged him nought.

The Black Man. Just who the devil—and *what*—was he?

Everybody tried to talk at once. Luckily, they all had the same story to tell:

The Black Man had walked all morning in Vergil's shadow unseen. Unseen by Vergil himself, that is. Everybody else had seen him just fine, thank you, and had assumed that Vergil was equally aware of his presence, and was eager to describe this negative-apparition:

He was tall, to begin with, taller than Vergil himself, who was not a short man, by a head at least. Nay, two heads. Naw yourself, but one. Didn't blink. Had a harsh and scornful look. A look of command. Command—who'd obey such as *he?* Run's more like it. African in origin, no doubt about that, consider his features, and yet like no African anyone had ever seen. Was black too.

Blacker than an Aethiope.

Blacker than an alembic's bottom.

Black.

What did he in Vergil's shadow? Well, he gestured thus and so. Arms wide. Fingers a-wiggle. Most particularly had he gestured thus when Vergil cast his ill-fated cantrip. The gestures that were made—but perhaps they were not accurately reproduced; "to lie like an eye-witness" being a phrase of most ancient lineage—were like nothing Vergil had ever encountered. He had made his gestures and then retreated to the doorway, to watch their results. Had left shortly after Ma poured salt on the flames. Was now gone. Where, no man knew.

"Emericho Count Mar."

"Roy over all the Roys, I hear but to obey."

They were in the Great Red Room in the New Palace. A sage-femme had once said that red was good again the measles. None had changed it syne. "The Archiver, ah, the *Great* Archiver, he tells me that at least five generations of your line, that Line of Mar, descended so he says from the gens of th'Emperor Marius, at least five have served this Imperial Court and Seat. Saith well? Saith well. All know that none but the House of Mar knows best the Ceremonies and the Manners. We wish Count Mar to understand quite well that there is a certain Lady very close to the Imperial Heart whom We should wish to see at Court. She be of good sound yeoman stock, you know, Count Mar, a widow-woman, her late vir was a captain of tens in the Sylvan Legion which fought valiantly in the Second War of... ."

It was a work of vanity for the Roman Roy to tell Count Mar what War the Sylvan Legion had fought in valiantly, Count Mar already knew; Count Mar knew all such things. All such things of import. And Count Mar knew well exactly what his Sire and Ser imported, the Emperor imported now that he would that a someone of rank should marry this a-said Lady so very close to the Imperial Heart, and by so doing give title and status to her, in fait the Roy's chief concubine. For, without someone of such rank did so, she might no more appear at Court than the laundress, be the laundress never so close to said Imperial Heart. Certes that no young man might do, for a young man might easily allow his veins to carry him away with a notion that literally he was a husband to the Lady, and to attempt and insist upon the fact. And this would not do, it would not do. And for sure that no one of recent creation of nobility would serve, for such had so very odd notions of their stature, the very newness of their station being such as to make them sensitive about it.

But someone of Emericho Mar's age and Emericho Mar's antiquity of title? Such a one would ken full well that twas an honor to be the Crown Lady and, hence, in mere title the husband and the vir de jure of the Crown Lady: an honor. Others? Let others prate that *Antiquity means decadence,* and *Let no baron be a bawd to the Bed Royale.* Mar was indifferent to such things. What held Rome together? The Roman Roy, held it. The Emperor was the sole fount of honor to the Empery, and therefore so— And the Emperor Festus, that same Festus, spoke very keenly to the Count Mar's ear when he murmured, "There are cer-

tain folk at Court descended from creations of the last three reigns who might look upon this with scorn … .

" … *canaille* …" muttered Count Mar. Rabble, what had *they* to be scornful about: contractors grown rich selling musty meats and rotten grain to the Governance-at-War, parvenus from Over-the-Seas whose origins might be (and therefore were) unspeakably low; the get of rich lawyers, sons of successful engineers (by definition: common as tufa), painted pimps, and tax-farmers; foreigners using tainted fortunes (foreign? by meaning: tainted) to buy their titles: Count Mar regarded the New Nobility as he might the throng about a bawdy house. " … *canaille* …" What did *they* have to be scornful about? Furthermore did he knew for a fact that some of them had got their feet in the stirrups of the Order of Knights by charms and cantrips and by witchery and guile unspeakably vile, their women being poisoners and abortionists and contrivers at assignation. Scarcely did such so-called nobility know how to adjust a toga. Eh? The Emperor? Clean a different thing, the Emperor was selected by seven kings (some said: seventeen: sage folk split no hairs), and by the process of Selection became Roy, became Royal. *Numinous*.

Strapping the sword about his waist—the *inconvenient* sword that was almost as much a nuisance as the young Chinese pothecary was, for he was obligated to wear it will-he, nill-he wherever he went these days, his badge of office, the sword with no name—Vergil set out to find the Black Man.

It was on the face of it no easy task to find a single man among the swarming millions of Rome. Yet even in eternal and eternally-jaded Rome a man seven feet tall, darker than any Aetheopian, and unblinking—such a man is noticed. And, for a copper or two, remembered.

The trail of small coinage led Vergil first to a poor neighborhood, and then to a yet-poorer tenement house. Three cabbage-smelling flights up, there was a door. He hammered on its frame. A silence. The creak of feet on old floorboards. The door opened.

Skin black as obsidian. Eyes unblinking as a snake's. "I am in the presence of an inferior," he said to the air. "But *how* inferior is he? Does he have such standing among his barbarous upstart race as to allow him admittance to my domicile without shame to me?"

Seeing his bearing, the palpable hauteur that hung about the man, the sneer that had not been achieved in less than thirty generations, Vergil knew the man for Aristocracy in his own land. Nor New Aristocracy, nor *Old* Aristocracy either. Old, *Old* Aristocracy. Older than the founding of Rome. Older than the rise of the Greeks or the Abyssinians before them. Older, perhaps, than the Flood.

Old.

Suppressing a quite inappropriate urge to bow, Vergil drew himself up and called upon his titles. "I hight Vergil Marius Mago, Bail to the Vicus of Ravenna, Captain of the Communality, Ser Messenger to the Doge of Naples and to the Vicar Imperial of the South, Co-Keeper of the Golden Clicket to the Golden Lock, Titular Count of Calabria, Titular Prince of Palermo, High Baron of High Barbary, Min Dan in Danland, Roman Knight and Patrician of the Romans, Magister of the Mountains with Ambulatory Jurisdiction ..." Suchlike worldly tokens did not Vergil himself impress; nor, he saw, was the Black Man moved by them as well. Feeling absurdly like a small child reciting his accomplishments before a visiting adult dignitary, he cut short the list of his civic (for he did not of course mention any of the ranks he held in The Order of Sages and Mages; such were forbidden) honors. "King Without Country."

The Black Man moved aside to let him in.

There was a feel in the room ... of power ... indecipherable, though. It came from the Black Man himself, but was like nothing Vergil had ever felt. Intuited. Experienced. Vergil well knew the feel and smell and even color of magic. This was nothing like.

This was something before which sorcery was a weak and strutting upstart. This was its negation and perfect opposite.

"I am stranded upon your sterile shore," the Black Man said. "Without family or friend or wealth. As for family, I am the last of my kind, and as for friends ..." He shrugged. "But before I die, I would return to my homeland. Gold will buy my way south to Nilus Meroë and Ophir, and from there to Farther Africa, where memory of Good King Boris may yet endure, and then through Equinox to lands whose names need not be defiled by your ears. So: gold I must have. My talents have been engaged by one who thinks his lineage sufficient. It is not. Yet the one behind the one behind that one I may without disgrace serve."

"Sir, I quite understand. As the poet said, it is enough to have perished once. Let us not compound poverty with disgrace. Yet your activities ..." he sought the neutral word, "*inconvenience* me. Surely you can see how they would?" No response from that face. Might's well be carved of obsidian. Or, more aptly, black granite, like certain monumental visages that Vergil had seen in Aegypt of that conqueror Dynasty that had swept down from the South like wolves upon the ... well, not lambs, exactly. And yet ... "Let me propose a solution. I have money. It flows to me effortless, these days; tis not my doing, but fate alone and my lack of desire for such; were I to bar my doors and windows 'gainst it, twould smash them down in its eagerness to reach me. Allow me to share some small fraction of my good fortune with you. Say ... twice what your sponsor offers? No names required! Only allow me the honor of paying for your peaceable passage home."

For a long moment, silence.

Finally, "How came you to be King Without Country? Is it—" the Black Man hesitated—"an *old* title?"

When Vergil was done explaining, the Black Man looked thoughtful. "It is not a hereditary position, then?"

"No."

"I had thought—well." The Black Man stood. "I am afraid you must leave now, sir. I can do nought to help you."

With greatest courtesy, he showed Vergil to the door.

Count Mar led the lady in question to the Nuptial Throne and by himself placed upon her fair hair the matron's saffron veil and drew it down upon her brow: Oria, her name.

As for whatso gifts the Crown and Throne might make available in the Fisc to the order of the Count Mar, the Count Mar was largely indifferent. Now and then he drew upon them to erect monuments to sundry foreparents not yet memorialized, including that famous Roman matron Julia, the *Conjux Carissima*, who had died fighting side by side with her vir, Audan, against the Samnites near Néapoly. Every now and then, using a small chauldron filled with Earth of Delphos and a brazier of burning laurel leaves, Count Mar would summon up the shades of his ancestors: and look on them at battle for the Roman altars and the Roman hearts.

However, less and less, lately.

The third day of the third week of each month (barring the Summers' heats) had usually … well … often … seen Count and Countess Mar together, not so much at Chastel Mar—though there, too—she savoring, even slightly, the pretense of being in fact as well as in law a Lady of Title with her titled husband in their titled fortress; he savoring, even … and thus and thus … the fancy of having a real wife. He *had* had one. Once. Long ago. She was dead. The child too. But as for the most of the hours of the third day of the third week of each month they had showed each other off where the Roman World could see. Reclined together as they were borne in one litter. Sat side by side in the same carriage rolling and rocking ponderously but elegantly (one did not think of *comfort* in those slow, clumsy vehicles: one thought of *show*. Paint. Gilt. Escutcheons. Heavy well-kempt horses with scarlet harness; heavy well-kempt horsemen in scarlet livery) down some suburban road. Worshipping together. Paying visits.

But for a full six months now: less. In fact: seldom.

And the old count's concern and increasing vexation about this seemed to fit in with his vexation and increasing concern in the matter of the King Without Country. Vergil by name.

By name Vergil.

King Without a Country.

Which King returned to his workshop to find it empty. Those hired specific to the day's work had been, of course, released. But Petronius, his blacksmith-general, who should have been repairing the damage and then awaiting his further instructions was also gone, along with—what was more ominous—all five of his sons.

The Chinese wizard Ma entered the workshop, face stiff with disapproval. "I warn. I say, you are like wine-skin that bulge with wine. Full of own thoughts and ideas. If you not empty yourself, I say, how you expect me to teach you? Hah? But they no listen."

"Where?" Vergil asked, with a premonitory chill. "Where did they go?"

Smiths are all sorcerers. Repeat: all. Consider Vulcan, consider Hephaestus, consider Daedalus, consider Weyland of Gaul … the list could be extended indefinitely. Or, if not sorcerers, then alchemists, which is to say privy to the exoteric if not the esoteric secrets of Guildery. Which, combined with the formidable musculature resultant from a

regular fourteen hours per day at forge and anvil relieved by frequent leathern tankards of cooling buttermilk, inevitably combined to convince all the breed of their own invincibility.

When such strong, knowing, and confident men were *loyal* as well … Twas a formula for disaster. In their self-certitude, they would feel for their Master a combination of protectiveness and condescension. They would think it proper to follow him to a dangerous confrontation, from a distance to be sure!, and wait nearby with their hammers and amulets to see its outcome. And when their Master swept by the alley in which they lurked, dark-browed and clearly defeated in his purpose … why, then, they would bethink themselves to take matters into their own brawny and capable hands.

So reasoned Vergil Magus as he ran through the piss-yellow streets of Rome, the nameless sword slapping against his side with every running stride, the Chinese magician squeaking and scurrying in his wake. Back the way he had come. Into the slums. To the tenement where the Black Man dwelt.

He turned a corner and stopped, aghast. Before him stood Petronius, smith-gen and artisan … burning, aflame, sooty flakes rising from the crisped horror of his body. And his five sons as well. They all six burned like candles fallen into the fireplace coals.

It was too late to help any of them. Yet still, Vergil tried. He did try. Moving widdershins, he called up his salamandaric powers, learnt in the Phoenicia of Sidon and not in the Phoenicia of Tyre (Tyre, burned to rock and ashes; Sidon, yet standing), and attempted to quench the flames.

With such lore had he defeated Phoenix himself. Yet now did the flames respond most disobediently, leaping toward the sky, hottening, burning whiter than angels … until, fuel gone, they dwindled, guttered and died.

Leaving nothing behind but greasy stains on the brick street.

Beyond where Petronius and his sons had been stood the Black Man, unblinking. Their eyes met and Vergil's mind filled with words. He had heard others, both human and *not*, speak within the sanctuary of his skull before. This was not like that. Rather, it was as if every word in his head, other than these had temporarily been erased.

You were shown hospitality. And betrayed it.

Vergil Magus stumbled away, numb with horror.

A here and a there and of a not infrequent time, the presence of a king was requisite; even the times of the republics had known the Kings of the Sacrifices. Kingdom after kingdom had been added to the Empery, was it not so? So it was. An empiry was by definition a foederation of kingdoms and of kings. Not so? So. And so it was not alone natural, it was necessary, that kings of kingdoms, roys of royaumes, should participate in certain matters of empery, that empery being as it were a kingdom of kings. The Council to Confirm the Accession of Territory. The Council to Advise on the Sending of Envoys into the OEconomion and Beyond. Council to Supply the Tars and Spars for the Fleet. Council to Authorize Debasement of Common Currency. And so on. And on, so. Now on the one hand a king might well agree that action on this matter or on that ought not occur saunce consent of kings, still, not always did a king wish to leave his own kingdom. *Dost tha see?* as Festus Imperator et Rex used to ask. Suppose a needed council required the presence of a set of kings. Perhaps to authorize (or not) the inclusion of another kingdom yet. Might the King of Cappadoce not feel affairs at home steady enough for him to leave. Perhaps the three Kings of Gaul did not trust one another at the time. Possibly the King of Aspania was in sooth sick. And yet a quorum was needed. Suppose said quorum of kings required another king more? what to do … what to do …? And then as well. Imagine that a king from outside the Empery arrived as visitor and guest, what more pleasant that, on route to be received by the Emperor said King (of Cush, let one say) said foreign king be first received by a king of the Empery? Agreed: twould be pleasant, good for good relations—*Thrice welcome, Scion of Memnon, Melcarth's Heir.*

—but suppose there *was* no King of the Empery to receive him?—Eh?

What then?

Often the Emperor might wish to take council of someone higher than a mere councilor. A consul? one of the (always) two Consuls of Rome, of which by now the Emperor was always one? This would not always, for various reasons, do. Hence the Emperor Ptolemy, but three reigns ago, finding himself in need of a King in Rome when no Kings *were* in Rome, took hold of The Patrician Ser Appius Appian, and crowned him King. "King over *what?* … Your Imperial Majesty? …" "All in good time, there. Presently. Come forth thou, then, King Appius

Appian, and sit at my side in a royal seat." The need, whatever it was, being by and by over: so what then? See now Ptolemy showing that what wit he had was not a false byword: a Document of Full Appointment of Appius Appian to be King Without Country.

King Without Country!

A master stroke.

Every right and pleasure and duty which any other King had (outside his own country), so had the King Without Country. Any office which any other King could hold (outside his own country), so could be held or holden by the King Without Country. And ... but ... here came the kernel within the nut ... however ... *no one who had ever held the Office of King Without Country could ever hold the Office of Emperor.* At one stroke just about any cause for jealousy among any of the Seven (or Seventeen) (not less than Seven) (not more than Seventeen) Selectoral Kings was removed. Why be jealous of some fellow in distant Rome? Why fear any plotting, what might he plot about? *The King Without Country could never be selected Emperor.* He might resign. He might be appointed and crowned another time or another hundred times: never might he, in royal office or in out, be selected Emperor.

And even, mark this, many ones said to many other ones, should an Emperor suspect that such a one, a clever fellow, capable, popular, charming, might possibly even if not now take steps to become Emperor e'en though not a King (in within the letter of the Iron Laws, some man not a King might be selected to the Seat Imperial)—that such a one might someday intrigue ... might plot ... take up arms ... plan ... connive ... this or that ... someone alas not politic to kill .... Well! A solution was always at hand. Kneel, thou loyal subject dan Fulano. We crown thee King Without Country. Rise, Fulano King.

As for income, income must follow. Income might follow out of the condescension of the Imperial Hand. And ... even if the Hand Imperial be stayed a bit just then ... there was always this: A purse of such and such at every Ides or Kalends. To be paid out of the Salt Gabelle. For salt was not *very* difficult to procure. Salt was an Imperial Monopoly. *Byword: the Roman Roy doth eat no salt.* Meaning: The Hand Imperial received all the income from the Salt Gabelle. And gave it all away. The astronomer Such-a-One had discovered a new star? named it after the Emperor? or the Empress? A purse of six gold solids. From the Salt. The salt. Byword: *The Roman Fisc is full of salt.* Somewhere there was

said to be a tribe, a sect, a sept, which designedly did eat no salt. So twas said, and, twas said, always their teeth fell out and their finger- and toe-nails, too. Nay, but each soul it must eat salt. There was always plenty salt. The tax itself? A trifle. A few stivers to the sack. The sack was large. Even if the Emperor was not lavish in assigning fiefs and such, still, never lacked for money in his purse, Whosoever: King Without Country. Nom.

When you have led through the Court Ceremonies a maritime magnate almost like a bear save that he had braided nostril-hair and broke wind with every ponderous step, then a well-mannered wizard was perhaps an acceptable relief. The Mage Vergil was more than civil to the Master of the Ceremonies. The Master of the Ceremonies was never more than civil to anyone.

Except to his wife.

When he was with her.

Vergil sat alone by lantern-light, closeted with books. He was alone. Save for Ma, of course. Who was (politely, admittedly, oh, invariably politely) hectoring him again. He must learn *fang-shwee*, path of dragons, paint a circle on the wall, place a mirror before the door so that any goblins entering would see their reflections and flee, direct a stream *just so* through the courtyard. All in the name of harmony and balance. It was easy enough to ignore, though every now and then a sentence would pop up out of the murmurous flow and astound:

"Must drink own urine every morning. Then never get sick."

A less charming way to start the day Vergil could not imagine. Scowling, he concentrated on his grimoires, grammaryes and tomes of discouraged lore (it would be centuries before anybody would be so foolishly selfless as to actively *forbid* such useful learnings). And here, now, before him, what was this? A rarely-employed technique labeled *Magica Alba*. White Magic. A magic of blizzards and milk, presumably, of lilies and ivory and goose down. Yes. With rising excitement, he began to read.

Yet even as his mind sought to fix itself upon the words, they wavered on the page, growing fluid in outline. Moistly the ink pulled itself up and off the parchment and formed into globs like quicksilver that rolled off the book and plashed from the slanted top of the reading table.

Leaving him with ink-blackened floor and a manuscript book of virgin parchment.

With a groan, Vergil raised his hands to the heavens (indeed, the roof was in the way; yet his intent was clear) and cried, "Where … *how* can I learn the secret of the Black Man's power?"

"That easy," said Ma. "I tell you."

Was Count Mar surprised when the Emperor Festus made Vergil Magus his King Without Country? No one ever knew if Count Mar ever was surprised. If he thought (others thought) (some others thought) that a background as the adopted son of a former servant to a company of wandering astrologers turned farmer was scarcely an aristocratic one, the Count Mar said not so. Said the Count Mar, At the point The King Without Country kneels upon his left knee: so. The King Without Country now arises. So. Let here at this point The King Without Country kneel upon his right knee, bow his head once … twice … thrice … so.

Such, the conversations between Vergil King Without Country and Count Mar The Master of the Ceremonies and the Roy Saunce Royaume. In fact, the neither of them gave a much thought about the other one of them. And then one day—

But wait. *Earlier.*

For full six months now, more and more seldom were the gaunt old he and the buxom young she seen together. When last had they dined at the high table in the Chastel at which nom else dining had been there for decades? Long. It beseemed the aged Count. Seldom were he and wife seen together? Seldom *were* together. More and more as the auld conde sat in the cold library in his chilly chastel unrolling the rent rolls of a hundred years before, looked down upon by gesturing posturing sword-brandishing members of the Line of the House in their dusty likenesses and limnings, or making notations for the tenth time about the Journal of his Grandser's campaign against the Kingdom of Carsus—or some such prideful and utterly vain antiquarianizing—more and more often did he realize it was and was only on the said third day, The Third Day, when his chamberman brought him a message and an elaborately carved and adorned case containing straw-padded covered dishes: "My Lord the Count, my ser and sire. My Lady the Countess much regrets that her work at Court with the Empress's Silk

Woman [Attiring Woman] [Embroidery Woman] must needs alas prevent my Lady the Countess," babble … babble … babble …" and send herewith a disk of one brace of partridges farced with liver of lark and almondbread," babble …

… babble …

… babble …

… babble …

Suddenly.

(What? when the Empress, never coming to Court, had no use of silk, embroidery, or attire soever! of a surety the things were for the use of the Countess, sole; what then?)

Suddenly there entered vision of a scene small thought of at the time. Vergil King passing through the Hall at Court wearing his trews of white samite and a broidered tabard, looped round with ropes of wire of gold the scabbard of a sword which only a King might wear at Court, passing in a quiet and full-seemly pace; should pass at angle before him and at once kneel and quickly kiss his hand, *who?* Oria, the Countess Mar. So. Of course she needs kneel and kiss the royal hand, the hand of any roy, cum royaume or saunce royaume. It was seemly that the king would at once half-bow and raise her. A word of grace between them. She passed on her way. He passed on his. A thing of nought.

And now this day, The Third Day of the Third Week of the Month, what? She was not to be here. Thus, what. Kissed the hand of the King Without Country. Was not to be here to be one sole day with her vir, her own husband. Was at Court, was perhaps even now a-kissing the hand of— *Lightning-bolt*: Why should not Count Mar, of his ancient House and Line, why should *he* not be, have been, *King Without Country?* There came to his mind: reply? nom. Count Mar's pride was high and deep. It was also very narrow. High and narrow. Narrow and deep. And thus he sat alone at his table, suddenly full of bitterness. And brooding sullen, ancient pride.

Sat he there long? None marked the time. In tumbling seeds of sand, selected by some long-dead sandifer for the hour-glass, perhaps not long at all. He sat. His chamberman stood. Usually Count Mar would flick his fingers at the courtly kickshaws, the chamberman would then serve a tepid polenta with cheap cheese, take away the dainty victuals and eat them with his family (his family would rather have had the common, coarse feeds to which they were accustomed, but the

chamberman considered it a stiver saved and carefully dropped a stiver in his savings-pot; someday he thus hoped to buy a milch-goat for his thrall-mother, growing too old for chewing even turnips, even grain). (Even common-folk have feelings, some philosophes know it not, eheu.) Usually, then, indeed, always, disturbed in his reflections on family pride, senile hunger satisfied and sated with traditional porridge or such loblolly, the Count's habits inclined him rise and go to Court.

To duty.

To duty.

For—family dead … or … all save one … and he half-dead—what remained?

Duty remained. Duty. Duty. Therein the real glory of the Line of the house of Mar of the gens of Marius Marcus, not sword and spear and brave death in battle, not for them alone, but in this: Duty. Duty. And if duty took the form of one who had usurped a place which should by rights have been and be his own? That scrawn stirk of the outlands? son of really who knows whom? Called "Marius" too, was he? All the more, then! Some day the stirk would stumble. The knacker would have already made sharp the knife.

So Virgil listened while Ma explained a totally new (to him) system of divination.

Passivity seemed to be the key. Where conventional forms of foreseeing the future all tried to impose order on the universe, this divination demanded nothing, imposed nothing, expected nothing. All the world, Ma explained, was flux and flow (well; even the Greeks knew *that*; could not step in the same river twice; nor even once; perhaps there was not even a river; but that was digression), and if one could but discern the direction of this flow … well, then one would ken whither it goest. Eh? By the reading of small, random, and chaotic events, the greater could be discerned. Once explained, it was orthodoxy itself.)

It was worth a try, anyway.

Ma went into a frenzy of activity, removing dark yerbs from his chest of many drawers, boiling water, preparing a suffusion. At last he proffered a cup of dark liquid to Vergil. "Now. You drink down most way to bottom. Not all way. Stop here. Most important, you stop here. Not later." Ma drew an imaginary line four-fifths of the way down to the bottom.

Vergil bethought him of the many visionary potions he had imbibed in his researches, and their attendant side-effects. Vomiting, diarrhea, headaches, to begin with, and progressing quickly to bleeding from the nostrils, mucous discharge from the anus, rashes laced with boils, incontinence, simultaneous loss of hair and balance, spontaneous generation of worms within the flesh … The more primitive the culture, it seemed, the greater the discomfort attendant upon discovering so simple a thing as the future. "Wouldn't it be simpler to just pour it off?" he asked.

"Drink."

He took a sip. The dark liquid was bitter and astringent. He shuddered and with suppressed loathing drank the rest, down to the prescribed line. Then he handed the cup to Ma.

Holding the cup in his left hand, Ma swirled the liquid three times around and then with a snap of the wrist inverted the cup onto the table. When he removed it, the wet *chai* leaves had formed a pattern.

Both men leaned low over the leaves.

"What does it say?" Vergil asked.

"What? Hey? Seneschal—what?" The seneschal was a-most as old as his courtly master. "My sire and ser, my dan the Count. A visitor. His Honor the Varlet to the Vavaseur of Idalia."

A varlet to a vavaseur was so low on the List of Honor as barely to be there at all. But be there he was. Be *here* he was. Who the devil *was* he? Who the devil was *he?*

Duty. Duty. Duty.

"The Varlet to the Vavaseur of Idalia will munch with me."

A gust of sudden sigh. "I am so unworthy—"

"True," said the Count Mar. In the air, hanging, *Nevertheless*, unbespoke. The chamberman set the trestle-table. The visitor got one of the partridges and the Count addressed himself to his nutmeal mush. The chamberman and the other partridge withdrew. (The extra-ancient Mother-thrall might mumble the almondbread dressing with loud *Ooo*s of delight, or she perhaps would spet it out with even louder *phooph*s. One never knew. Life was full of change and interest even for a serf.) The Count, meanwhile, completely forgot that he even *had* a visitor; his pale-blue eyes slightly milky, even a thin film upon them like that upon a lightly-basted egg, and rimmed with red, veined and

weined with red, looked upon an older scene: a Chastel Mar filled with noble men-at-arms, the Old Count's Father, the Older Count, in armor and full prime and pride of life, and—But such scenes with or without the assistance of Delphic earth and burning smoking laurel-leaves, such scenes no longer served. Even as a prisoner will sate and cloy his womanless life with masturbatory fantasies, so for long and long the Count Mar had sated and cloyed his warless life with fantasies of war. After many a winter the prisoner's fantasies cease to have any individual particularity, merge into one single flattened-out omnifantasy, and cease to be of an avail: so the bellic fantasies of the Old Count Mar.

In his heart he cried *War! War!* but there was no war.

"The bosom is full of thorns—"

What? *What?* What strange buffoon was this, ill-shaved, ill-washed, in dusty integuments, hypocrisy overlaying him like a membrane thin: but clearly visible; *who?* Instantly recognized, the worn-down badges of a varlet ... authorized to fly the narrowest of bannerets ... and of a vavaseur ... the lowest rank of an hereditary honor ... *the serf of a thrall, a scullion's vassal,* instanta formed the scornful thought ... but which vavaseur? which yerb upon that dirt-and sweat-stained broidered badge, *which?*—second knowledge to the old courtier: *Idalia.* Produce: Thyme.

"The bosom is full of thorns to observe how this wittold warlock The King Without Country—"

Count Mar was full awake now, "'The King Without Country,' *what*—?"

Doggedly the shabbykins repeated his stupid formula, that *the bosom was full of thorns,* "to observe how this wittold warlock The King Without Country behaves, to the total and intire dishonoring of the lordly Count Mar, Reverenced and Worshipful Master of the Ceremonies—"

The so-pale-blue of the ancient eyes deepened. The yellowed face tightened. Even the untrimmed white hairs in the nostrils bristled. The whole figure of the classical and insulted figure was at once full of life—

—of rage—

—like a hungry wolf who lights upon a scent—upon a spoor—

"And so? the Varlet to the Vavaseur of Idalia? *eh?* EH?"

The visitor let his eyes roll around the room, proved it empty save for he and host. Eyes a-gleam like a beastling's in the night; he bent forward, unbrushed brow-hairs, untrimmed cheekbones, ears, unwashed body—reek! sharp! pungent! careless of all—

"There is come from the crypto-court of the unacknowledged heir to Boris King of Africa, of Farther Africa, Count Mar," he whispered as be leaned; "a one with a singular specialty of craft. *He performs sorceries upon sorcerers!*" Triumphant, the man sat back. Smacked the table softly with his palms.

Count Mar smacked his own palms upon it, pushed himself up. His mouth dropped open. And, *"War!"* he cried.

He cried, *"War!"*

"War! War! War! War!"

Fumbled in his pouchet. Withdrew a whetstone. And next drew forth a knife.

The Black Man stood in the middle of the Street of Mages, waiting for Virgil. Had this been difficult to arrange? It had *not.* Though the Black Man had abandoned his tenement lair ("Skipped out, and good riddance," said his landlord, spitting for luck on a floor that had patently endured more than its share of such treatment), Vergil had simply sent criers throughout Rome crying a challenge to the Black Man to meet in the Street of Mages at noon. It was a challenge he knew would not be refused.

A challenge to fight a wizard's duel.

The Black Man, as had been said, stood waiting. In the crowd to his back, hopping excitedly from foot to foot, waving scrawny fists, shouting deprecations (and yet nobody save Virgil paid him any attention; might's well be one of the hundreds at a chariot race for all the attention he got; and Virgil paid him little enough) was Mar of House Mar. He was tired of being a spectator. He had come to smell blood.

Not that blood had much of a smell *per se.* Which fact Count Mar knew. He was a historian of war. It was in a metaphoric sense that he desired the smell.

There were thousands of onlookers, for the criers had gone everywhere. The buildings bulged with spectators. The roofs overflowed. Many had brought with them lunches. In front of the workshop behind Vergil all his faithful workmen, even those whom he had not seen in years, stood shoulder to shoulder in their best smocks, displaying solidarity with their sorcerous Magister. Everyone who could talk his way in was there, Oria and Ma as well.

The two mages strode toward each other until they were close enough to spit upon one another, were either undignified enough (they were not) to do so.

The Black Man raised his arms.

Vergil drew his sword. The sword with no name.

It was no easy thing for a sword to avoid acquisition of a name. The least trait or incident would suffice. Dost whistle when swung in the air? Deathsminstrel. Born in the forges of Caliburnus? Excaliburn. Left it leaning on the outside of the tavern on the sunniest day of the year and came out not more than three drinks later to find it all a-rust? Stormbringer.

Vergil had overseen the forging of the blade himself, the work done by a blacksmith mute from birth, and when one of the apprentices had cried out on its emergence from the cooling bath (it was a stock sales technique; *let the mark leave happy* being a byword of greatmost antiquity), "Ah! 'Tis a very—" 'wonder' he was about to say, or 'marvel,' and there twould've been, Wonderblade or Wizard's Marvelment, when the magus's fist in the hollow of his stomach had cut short the thought.

"Thank you," the mage had said. "I'll take it."

It was important that this be a sword without a name, for if Vergil were to occasionally find himself wearing such a thing during his researches (in a situation, say, where his professional and pseudoregal duties coincided), why then, it were wisest that the blade were alchemically neutral. There was magical power in names. And in this sword, none.

Vergil swung up the explicitly un-magical sword. The Black Man flung his arms out to either side, fingers wriggling like snakes, to turn his magics against him. For what use had a magus of a sword? Well, a hundred actually. All of them powerfully magical. None of which involved a straightforward stab into his enemy's chest.

Blood gushed.

"Oh," said the Black Man.

He fell forward.

Dead.

In the stunned silence, Vergil turned to Count Mar, who stood suddenly exposed by the fall of his champion. The old count did not return his look with any great enthusiasm. "You," said the magus, sternly.

"Lord Mar. What earthly reason do you have for this unprovoked attack upon me?"

"I … well … of course …" The Count flapped a hand toward his Countess, his wife, Oria. "The … ah … the insult … to the honor … of … my wife?" he ended weakly.

"For jealousy?" Oria said. "You tried to kill King Vergil for *me?*" She ran forward and flung her arms about the neck of Emericho, Count Mar, Master of Ceremonies to the Court, her husband. "Oh, 'Rico!" she squealed. "You *darling* man!" And to his absolute befuddlement, kissed him then and there.

She was a girl who knew which side her bed was buttered on, was Oria.

So there it was: Hero triumphant, villain dead in the dust, and now the clinch: the two lovers reunited. And if one were a trifle old for the role, well. One can't have everything. To a man and women, the bystanders cheered, whistled, stamped, and threw their caps in the air. They might not know exactly what had just happened. But they knew a good story when they saw it.

Count Mar then set his wife, Oria, Countess Mar, to one side and, with the astonishing assurance of the Old Aristocracy, took Vergil's arm and led him aside. "This is a touch embarrassing, old boy, but I'm certain you in your professional capacity as a wizard and negromancer will of course … well, to put it bluntly, one finds oneself in need of a yerb or potion, something that will—as the saying goes—put some lead in the old stylus.

"For a friend, you understand," he added quickly. "Not for one's self."

A King Without Country had many responsibilities, as many, indeed, as the Emperor in his wisdom might choose to heap upon his shoulders. Withal, he could not levy taxes, nor raise troops. Neither could he set policy nor declare war. He had not the powers of High nor Low justice, could practice neither infangthief upon criminal villeins, nor outfangthief upon suspicious-looking vagabonds, could not condemn a felon, nor imprison a traitor, nor e'en so much as *fine* a citizen, be the rascal never so annoying to endure. He could not aspire to the office of Emperor.

What advantage then, when all is said and done, hath a King?

Ans.: A King may forgive.

"I have," Vergil admitted, "just the thing."

Of a night not many months after, Vergil met with a certain Lady, incognito, at a small farmhouse in the Libertiex of Etruscany. The Lady was accompanied by her aged crone of a mother and a ragged varlet with emblems of the Vavaseur of Idalia whom Vergil did not recognize, for he had never before laid eyes upon the man. Vergil was accompanied only by his unshakable Chinese wizard. "So she's tupped-up, is she?" said the Lady, when he was done his tale, wiping tears of laughter from the corners of her eyes.

"Most gracious Imperial Maj—" he began.

"Call me Aunt Pet," she said. "They all does."

"Aunt Pet. Yes, she is. Pregnant."

Her eyes narrowed. "Ye're not gawna try nor conwince me it were *Mar's* doing? I'se not so provincial as all *that!* I don't care how much lead thee puts in an eighty-year-old stylus, t'ain't gwinter write no such nonsense."

"No, Maj—Aunt Pet. The child is the work of your husband, the Emperor."

She wheezed with laughter, and slapped her thigh thunderously. "Well, b'ain't that just like him! As ready to rut as a goat! I remember a time when—"

Patiently, Vergil endured a ribald tale the single repetition of which in the Eternal City would be worth his head and the pole upon which it would be stuck. Standards were different out here in the country, of course. Then he said:

"Aunt Pet, I would there were peace between us."

"Why, lor bless you, why shouldn't there be?"

"You convinced Count Mar to hire the Black Man to kill me. I thought you might have had some reason."

Aunt Pet blushed.

"Mummsy," she said gently, "why don't you go with that nice Chinee-man, the Babylonian or whatever. Have him show you how to fix up someat magical from his little boxy-thingie, eh?"

Then, when the reverenced hag had dragged young Ma off to the kitchen, she lowered her voice confidentially.

"It's me mother. The Imperatrix-Mum. *Her.*" She gestured with a nod of her head. "She enjoys a spot of court intrigue, so we keeps a

few spies, traitors, assassins, and so on, on the payroll. Just so she can keep a hand in—it means so much to her, old dear!" She lowered her voice. "They none of them does any *real* spyin'. Just sits in Rome on the expense account, boozin an whorin an guzzlin an makin up lies to send home." Then, raising her voice, "All save for *one* wha's too *dim* to understand that when it's raining soup, ye holds out yer skirt."

She glared at the varlet who shivered and hunkered further down into himself.

To break the tension, Vergil said, "One more question. Just who is the Vavaseur of Idalia?"

She clucked her tongue. "Why, bless you, sweets, *I* is! It's a hobby I has. I collects titles. Big ones, little ones. I has one of each by now, I reckon. I don't fancy it costs dear Festus nothing."

Which pretty much wound up everything Vergil had come to ask. It would be impolite, though, to leave so abruptly. Also dangerous. The lady was still the Empress, and it was night, and there were (doubtless) wolves. So Vergil stayed, and talked, and listened. It was surprisingly pleasant to deal solely with inconsequalia for a change. Even a King (even One Without Country) can enjoy a touch of gossip.

After a time they began to speculate on the sex of the Emperor's forthcoming bastard. Not that it mattered to the Emperor, he had dozens of the things, one more was simply one more, and rumor had it he was growing tired of Oria (and why else would she have arranged for the child otherwise?) anyway. But for Lord Mar, who yearned for the continuation of House Mar *by whatever means necessary*, as the saying goes (nor would it be the first time the blood of the Old Aristocracy had been thus refreshed by intercession of the Emperor), and for Oria, who had gone through so much to acquire an heir, it made an enormous difference whether she whelped a boy who could inherit the name *and estates* of Mar, or a girl, who could not. "An she were here," said Petronella, "I could tell by looking in her een. They always shows there, boy or girl."

A shiver went up Vergil's spine, for occulomancy was an old witch's trick, and he remembered stories he had heard about the Empress's past. Weaving … how was it the revered sage of Terra Incognita Occidentalis had phrased it, a passing reference in a long conversation through a brass tube that had occurred years after the man's ostensible death? … "weaving counter-spells against the witcheries of the Petchenegs and Scotes …" *Some*thing like that.

And with that the last piece of the puzzle fell into place.

The Black Man had refused his offer of money because his pedigree was insufficiently old. Whose, then, *could* he respect? Not Count Mar, who was (by the Black Man's standards) something of an upstart.

Some titles, however, were older than Rome. Older than civilization. Older than anything that can be named.

He cast a sharper look at the creature he had at first taken for some mongrel breed of lap-puppy and now recognized to be no such thing. No such animal as this was existed. On this world, anyway. Such creatures existed on the physical plane only as familiars.

Quickly, Vergil slid from his stool onto a single knee. "Eldest," he whispered, and then a word of homage in a tongue that not a dozen men alive could speak.

"Hush," Petronella said sharply. "Sit back down, thee. Have a hazzlenut. Festy sent me a bushel just last calends. Should be some not rotted yet."

This line of conversation was interrupted by the abrupt reappearance of Ma. He carried a cup of the same steaming suffusion with which he had earlier unraveled the knot of knowing that had so bound Vergil. He thrust it at Aunt Pet.

"You wish to know about child," he said. "Drink."

Horrified, Vergil reached to stop the royal hand. But it went, instead, to a nearby honey-pot (it was the honey of thyme, not clover-honey or wildflower-honey; there was in Idalia no lack of thyme), there to dip a spoon and stir, once, twice, thrice, and up. A golden glob of sweet and amber-brown honey came up with it, and descended into the drink. Her majesty stirred, set aside the spoon, tasted.

"Nowt half bad," she decided. "Might go nice with a touch of milk."

The Chinese wizard waited until the cup was near-done. Then he took it back, and before Aunt Pet's shrewd eyes gone suddenly gullible, swirled the liquid in the cup around and around. In which instant Vergil saw, with an intuitive occulomantic leap of his own, that among the next basket of trinkets and favors to be begged of the Emp. Festus IV, would be one requesting the custodianship of a certain young outland magician.

With a crisp turn of his wrist, Ma snapped the cup down onto the table. He lifted it away.

They all of them, even including the Varlet to the V. of I., leaned low over the leaves. Such is the miracle of a child's birth that, though it happens every day a thousand thousand times over, interest in it never dims. The wonder is ever-green.

The Chinese wizard spread his hands in joy. "A boy," he said. "A boy!"

Jane Swanwick and the Search for Identity

My sister Jane has not behaved at all well. She has lied. She has been cruel and capricious. She has professed a love she did not feel, and so hurt at least one person very badly. And her existence is, at best, provisional.

Whoever she is, Jane is no relation of mine.

Here's what happened:

Not long ago, in preparation for a trip to Chillicothe, Ohio, I ducked out to the Thrift Drug to buy some sinus pills. When I returned, ten minutes later, my teenage son, Sean, was looking spooked. He asked me, "What are the names of your sisters?"

"Patty, Mary Carol, and Barbie," I said carefully. "You knew that."

Relieved and a little confused, Sean said, "Well, that's what I thought. But you got a call from some guy in California who said he heard on the Net that your sister Jane died at a concert. I wrote down his number."

I called the number with a great deal of dread. I have in the past, and no reason to go into the details, been reassured that a loved one had been confused with somebody else's corpse, only to discover that, no, the worst had happened. I have three sisters, whom I love, and they live in the real world. Anything can happen.

It was a California number. It was answered on the first ring. My caller was waiting for me. He wanted to ask: Did I have a sister named Jane? Did she teach at the University of California at San Diego? Had she died a few days ago while attending a rock concert?

I answered no, no, and thank God no.

He told me his story:

The Californian had met my supposed sister, Jane, on the Net, and had had what he characterized as a passionate year-long affair with her, though they never met in the flesh. They were, it had seemed, soul-mates. One of many things they had in common was that he liked my novel *The Iron Dragon's Daughter,* and she, of course, was my sister.

In the fullness of time the two arranged to get together. Jane was going to fly down to her lover's city. Then, three days before the appointed date, the Californian received a letter, purportedly from a friend of Jane's, saying that she had died the night before, at a concert. Either because he was suspicious or because he wanted to attend the funeral, the Californian called the university where she had told him she taught. They had no listing for her.

He made several calls, trying to verify that the woman he loved had an actual existence and failing to do so. Finally he called me and asked was I the guy who wrote *The Iron Dragon's Daughter,* and did I have a sister who had died recently? Yes, I was. No, I did not.

I honestly did not know what to say to this unfortunate man. Finally I rather clumsily offered him the feeble consolation that whoever "Jane" actually was, she was at least not dead.

"Yes," he said, "but it was a cruel trick to play on my heart."

It was terribly sad.

You can be anyone you want on the Net, of course. Jane may well have been a teenage boy, or an old and overweight woman with a sour marriage. Whether straight or gay, old or young, gloating over the pain inflicted or miserably aware that yet another attempt at human contact has spun out of control, Jane has done nothing that hasn't been done hundreds of times before, nothing that won't be repeated countless times yet to come.

But I do not think it a coincidence that the protagonist of *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* is also named Jane. If I had a younger sister named Jane, then she must obviously be the model for the heroine of my book. By assuming the persona of my nonexistent sister, "Jane" came as close as anybody plausibly could to passing herself off as a fictional character.

There have been numerous incidents in science fiction of people impersonating writers. Gardner Dozois, upon hearing that somebody had assumed his identity in order to cadge free drinks from awestruck

fans, lamented that his legitimate possession of his own identity had never done that well by *him*. Alfred Bester told a hilarious story of encountering his own impersonator at a party and keeping his silence because the man was so obviously better at it than he. Other impersonations have proved less benign.

But such impersonations are assumptions of genuine accomplishment by those who yearn for it. Assuming the attributes of someone who *doesn't exist* is a phenomenon of a different order.

Strangely enough, this was not the first time my path crossed that of a fictional-character impersonator. The first such occurrence happened when I was attending a Chemical and Biological Warfare conference in Maryland.

The CBW conference was an education for me in many ways: I went in that morning never having even heard of Fort Detrick. By afternoon, when a man sitting beside me rose to identify himself as a researcher there, I cringed away from him in horror. (It did not help that he was vigorously disputing the nonexistence of an effective anthrax vaccine—"Then what have I been shooting into my butt three times a week for the last eight years?"—and tended to spray saliva when upset.)

But the most intriguing encounter of that long and informative day—though I did not recognize it as such at the time—occurred over lunch. Seating was random, so the doctors and researchers at my table began by identifying themselves and their affiliations. It turned out that I was not the only non-health-professional there.

The other civilian claimed to be Ron Goulart's college roommate, and the original for his Jose Silvera stories. Jose Silvera was a two-fisted freelance writer, a man who could pound out eighteen thousand words on any subject overnight, and who then had to resort to commando-type skills (rappelling down cliffs, flinging grenades, breaking into tightly defended editorial fortresses) to obtain payment from a variety of tight-fisted publishers. Humor is a subjective thing, but I thought the Jose Silvera stories were hilarious.

Silvera (as I'll call him, though he did not go so far as to assume the name) said he was covering the conference for a magazine. Which claim I did not find improbable. There was plot enough in that day for an *excellent* article. Learning I wrote SF, he asked if I'd ever heard of Goulart. He said that his early experiences trying to collect moneys

due him for various freelance writings had tickled Goulart's funny bone, and inspired the series.

"Is that so?" I said casually, while inwardly I thought: *Neat.*

Two months later I ran across Ron Goulart and, having (typically) forgotten the man's name by then, said, "I met your college roommate recently."

"I never had a college roommate," Goulart said. And, when I told him the whole thing, "Those stories were based on my own experiences." He'd never heard of the man.

It's self-evident, I should think, why a freelance writer might wish to impersonate Jose Silvera. But why my Jane? Well, there's the sexual element, of course. Somewhere in the course of our awkward, fumbling conversation, the Californian told me that he'd very much liked *The Iron Dragon's Daughter,* "particularly the erotic sections." I'd taken great care that for all the sex Jane engaged in (and she *was* young), she was never punished for acting upon her desires. The worst that ever happened to her as a result of sexual activity was the time she slept with Billy Bugaboo and he kept hanging around, hoping it would happen again.

But I'm afraid that Jane's basic makeup is a natural magnet to impostors. Jane was a changeling, a human girl who had been stolen by the Tylwyth Teg (elves, though not of the highest order) and forced to work in a factory, building dragons. Jane was the victim of injustice and a hostile world. She deserved better. Ultimately, she survived by creating a series of personae for herself, crafting a new one upon need and discarding the old one when it no longer served its purpose.

Small wonder a shape-shifter like "Jane" would identify with her.

"They say that Heaven is like TV," Laurie Anderson sings—"a perfect little world that doesn't really need you." And so is the novel. To assume an identity that not only does not but cannot exist is a rejection not only of the self, but of the world that engendered it and a declaration of allegiance to a perfect little world somewhere beyond one's grasp.

The irony here is that Jane Alderberry (if that really "is" her name), the heroine of my novel, herself rejected and in the end was literally rejected by the world in which she found herself.

So that "Jane" is fantasizing herself out of a universe in which she does not feel she belongs and into one in which her idealized self does not belong. I worry about "Jane." She is caught in a spiral maze, whether she recognizes it or not, and I see no easy exit for her. Or "her." Identity is a construct, and like any tool, it can also be used as a weapon. And if used as a weapon, it can be turned either outward or inward.

Superficially, it would seem that Jane has held her sword edge outward. But if I had to guess, I'd say that her very choice of weapons indicates that the blood on her hands comes as much from herself as from as anybody else.

As to my Californian … perhaps he's not so badly off as he might be.

I know what it's like to have your heart broken, and I know what it's like to have somebody you love die. They're neither of them pleasant, but if you had to choose one, you'd be wisest to go with the broken heart.

The Hagiography of Saint Dozois

Did you know that Paul McCartney used to be in a different rock band before Wings? Okay, maybe that was too easy. Here's another. Did you know that Gardner Dozois is a better writer than he is an editor? No, really, listen:

> Did y'ever hear the one about the old man and the sea? Halt a minute, lordling; stop and listen. It's a fine story, full of balance and point and social pith; short and direct. It's not mine. Mine are long and rambling and parenthetical and they corrode the moral fiber right out of a man. Come to think, I won't tell you that one after all. A man of my age has a right to prefer his own material, and let the critics be damned. I've a prejudice now for webs of my own weaving.

Those two paragraphs immediately above, with their sudden irruption into wit and color, "social pith" and vinegar, are the opening lines to "A Special Kind of Morning," in which Gardner squanders enough ideas to fuel a standard trilogy of SF novels on one fast story-within-a-story that's ostensibly about a rebellion against a tyranny so absolute that no price is too great for liberty and a war so terrible that by its end those fighting it no longer care for victory. But really it's about life and love, valor and compassion and freedom and all those things that really matter. The two central events of the story, in fact—the lordling's first experience of physical love, and the death of the ancient storyteller—take place just before and after the story itself. And

it's explicit that these events are forever recurrent, always happening, that it's always (somewhere, for somebody) a special kind of morning. Even on the day that you die.

So can you picture it now? Not a tenth of it.

Nor can you appreciate the high regard in which Gardner is held by his fellow writers unless you've actually *read* "Machines of Loving Grace" and "Chains of the Sea" and "Morning Child" and the scant few dozen other stories he's produced over the decades, most of which can be found in his two solo collections, *The Visible Man* and *Geodesic Dreams,* and his collaborative collection, *Slow Dancing Through Time.* He's picked up two Nebulas for his stories (they gleam demurely from amid the thicket of vulgar "Best Editor" Hugos on his trophy table), but so what? Awards are only important when you don't have any. What truly matters is the work itself, and to appreciate that you'll simply have to dig through used book stores to find his collections and his sad, beautiful novel, *Strangers.* It won't be easy. It'll be worth the effort.

So if this guy's so good, then what (I rhetorically posit that you might reasonably ask) is he doing working as an editor? I might claim simple economics. Everybody knows that nobody can make a living writing short fiction in this field, but even if you *could* make a living writing short fiction, you couldn't make a living writing it at the pace Gardner does. He's a craftman and an artist. The craftsman will write no story before its time. The artist takes his orders from the hindbrain. If his hindbrain doesn't care to give him any material to work with this month, then tough. The unconscious knows nothing about the price of groceries.

When you write like that, you'd better have a day job.

But the connections are not so simple as that. Because Gardner's day job happens to be editing *Asimov's,* a position which he inherited from Shawna McCarthy who in turn inherited it from George Scithers. Quite frankly Shawna and George were tough acts to follow. Both are capable and popular editors who published a lot of top-flight stories in *Asimov's* and established it as the single most important magazine in the field. Yet I believe that it is Gardner Dozois who will be forever associated with the magazine, much as Campbell is with *Analog* and Ross with the *New Yorker,* regardless how able those who follow him may be.

Again, why?

Bear with me, while I engage in a touch of circumlocution. I first met Gardner twenty-umpty-some years ago at a Philcon. He was sitting in a hallway, surrounded by fans, giving a dramatic reading of Robert Heinlein's *Time Enough for Love,* in order to demonstrate that sections of it had the same cadence as Longfellow's "Hiawatha." (Go ahead, try it for yourself. Chapter XI: "Stand with me on man's old planet,/ gazing north when sky has darkened … Here is life or here is dying;/ only sin is lack of trying./Grab your picks and grab your shovels;/dig latrines and build your hovels—" And so on.) He was a one-man carnival. Later that night, as one by one the parties closed down around our merry band, he led the survivors up and down the halls for hours looking for the mythical Last Party that must be surely out there somewhere.

Since then, I've hung out with Gardner a lot. I've seen him in extreme poverty and relative affluence. I was around when, almost totally blind, he checked into the hospital, expecting never to leave. I've co-written stories with him, one of which, a three-way with Jack Dann called "The Gods of Mars," made it onto the Nebula ballot, and another, "The City of God," which contains some of the finest prose (his) I've ever had the pleasure to muck about with. For the past several years I've been working on an interview in which I ask him detailed questions about every story he's ever had published. (It's currently up to 45,000 words and counting.) So I know a lot about the man. I even know, as not many can claim to, about the time when he was five years old and his mother took him to the seashore at the height of a hurricane to watch the moon crash into the Earth.

But that's not what you want to hear about. You want a simple, lucid explanation of Gardner Dozois. For which, let's go back to the early 1970's.

Back then he used to visit Manhattan regularly to make the round of editors. While he was pitching and selling the occasional anthology to help keep body and soul together, he dropped praise in unreceptive editorial ears for new and talented writers like Gene Wolfe and Howard Waldrop, people whose work was considered too weird, too literary, just plain *too good* for science fiction. He was a one-man unpaid publicity service for stories now considered classics but back then so far out on the edge that they were in serious danger of going unpublished.

I saw Gardner only a day or two after he got the *Asimov's* gig, and I am here to testify that what he was ecstatic about was not the money or the influence or the status of the thing, but the chance to place some of those stories in print.

Sometimes I drop by when Gardner's working on his annual juggernaut of contemporary literature, *The Year's Best Science Fiction* (can we really be coming up on its fifteenth year?), agonizingly searching for a sufficient number of top-grade stories from other people's publications to make it clear that the volume is more than just this year's *Best of Asimov's*. And I am here to testify that every such story he finds in *F&SF* or *Omni Online* or Mike Resnick's *Alternate Dental Hygienists* is a spiritual pain to him. It *grinches* Gardner that somebody else got to publish them first.

It is this desire to find and publish "the good stuff" that drives and defines Gardner Dozois. He loves science fiction with an intensity that that very few can match.

Odin gave an eye for wisdom. Gardner paid for his editorship with his own fiction. Serious editing takes the same kind of creative energy as does serious writing. John W. Campbell was a highly-regarded writer before he took over *Astounding*. He lived to see that contribution almost forgotten. So too with Gardner Dozois. These days he writes maybe one story a year. Sometimes it's a light one. Sometimes not.

I had a dream the other night. I fell asleep reading Dumas, and it seemed to me that I was a Musketeer. In defense of the Queen's honor, I had quite handily killed several of Richelieu's men. At last, however, I was captured and brought before the vengeful Cardinal himself. Things were not looking good for me. But fortunately I had upon my person a most valuable parchment, which I presented to Richelieu with a flourish.

What has been done, it read, *was done in my name and for the good of science fiction.*

It was signed (of course) by Gardner Dozois.

Ancestral Voices

by

Michael Swanwick and Gardner Dozois

Like all intelligent creatures, it adapted.

Behind it was fire! fear! pain! horror! and it fled from them through madness and roaring chaos, fled for a long nightmarish time through an unfamiliar world, through a phantasmagorical confusion of alien shapes and lights and stinks and noises, fled until its strength was gone and it could flee no more.

After that was the black churning darkness of oblivion.

When it came to itself again, awareness returning bit by incremental bit, it was in a dank and narrow alley between the back of a decaying flophouse hotel and the side of a liquor store, lying still in the deep black shadow behind a mound of overstuffed green garbage bags.

Warily, it surveyed its surroundings, taking in the tall brick walls that rose on either side, the muddy, slime-coated pavement upon which it rested, the dull red light—from an ancient, buzzing neon sign on the corner—that ebbed and flooded rhythmically through the darkness, the thin sliver of alien sky far overhead … and again it was taken by disorientation and fear. It reached instinctively for knowledge, for connection with the flood of data that would tell it location, status, mission, and instead it touched fire! fear! pain! horror! and recoiled from the searing agony of the memory.

Cautiously, it tried again to remember, like an electric linesman testing a live wire by gingerly brushing it with his thumb, and again it

was driven back by the sizzling intensity of what lurked in the recesses of its own mind. Again and again it tried to remember, until its mind was ablaze with pain, and shudders ran like waves across the long flat carpet of its body. But nothing would come.

Its past was gone. It *had* no past—it had been born in that endless moment of pain and red screaming chaos, and before that it could not go. Instinctively it knew that it didn't belong here, that the world around it was alien, frighteningly *wrong*, but it couldn't remember how the world should be, what or where home was, what it was doing here in this place whose wrongness beat in upon its senses from every side.

Trembling, it lay flat in the cold mud of the alley. Each new sound from the unknown world beyond, each metallic roar or shriek or clatter, sent a new pulse of terror through it.

And then something blocked part of the light from the alley-mouth.

A monstrous figure loomed there, huge and dark and terrible.

There was the sound of a can being kicked underfoot, sent clattering away against the wall.

The figure moved slowly closer, down the alleyway, swaying, staggering from side to side, pushing a wave of rich alien stink before it.

"Oblah-*dee*," the figure muttered. "Oblah-dee, oblah-*blah*—" It crashed against the wall, pushed away again. "Life goes *onnnn*, blah—" The figure coughed, coughed again spasmodically, hawked and spat. "Sonsabitches," it mumbled. "Think they can tell *me* ..."

Weaving. Coming closer.

It saw the wino with the colorless, directionless perception characteristic of its race, but, more importantly, it *felt* him, felt the rush and interplay of electrical impulses along the intricate pathways of the wino's nervous system, felt the cold living fire that pulsed about the cerebrum, felt the sensuous shifting and interweaving of alpha and beta rhythms ...

Suddenly, it was *hungry*.

The hunger rose in a bitter, biting flood, driving away fear, overwhelming everything. For a moment it didn't know what to do, and then instinct took over, a deep cellular knowledge that sent it rippling silently forward, deeper into the shadow cast by the wall of garbage bags, its mantle stiffening and rising.

It melded itself flat against the cold surface of the bags.

It waited ...

The wino had stubbed his toe and was cursing in a low, racking undertone. Then he stumbled forward again. "Wham-bam, thank you ma'am," he muttered. "*Oh* yeah. Oh *yeah*." He lurched against the garbage bags, almost toppling them, then ripped one open with both hands and began rummaging clumsily, spilling tin cans and bottles and soggy old paper bags to the ground. "You don't know how lucky they *aarrrree,* boys ... back in the—back in the—shit!" An empty pint crashed to the ground, breaking with a flat, pinpoint spray of glass. He chuckled. "Dead soldier. Don't make no nevermind. What I should of told her, what I *shoulda* told her ..." He fished an old sneaker out of the trash, examined it, wriggling his fingers through the large hole in the sole. "*Oh* yeah." He threw the sneaker aside, leaned forward into the shadow.

The wino's face filled its field of vision, huge, terrifying, slathered in bristly black whiskers, eyes as big and bloodshot red as harvest moons, the stink of corruption breathing from the slackened lips ...

"Molly stays at home and does her fucking face." He dug his arms more deeply into the trash. "Oblah—"

It struck.

The derelict jerked convulsively, as if he had walked into a high-tension line, jerked again, and toppled to the ground, bringing the trash can clattering down with him.

It stretched its body into a rope to follow him down, maintaining contact, feeding, feeding voraciously ...

On the ground, the wino twitched and quivered, already dead, his eyes rolled horribly up into his head, the whites gleaming in the starlight. It too quivered as it fed, its long flat body pulsing and swelling like a fire hose with a high-pressure head of water working through it.

Then—stillness. The wino's body had shrunken, collapsed in upon itself, sucked dry of all nourishment. Only the blood and bone and flesh was left behind. It spread its own body out, relaxing, allowing itself to form into a flat, almost-oval, molecule-thin carpet about five feet across.

But with the blunting of its hunger, fear returned.

Something huge and rank drifted past the alley-mouth, bellowing in a tremendous voice, making a terrible iron crash and clatter—

It started, contracting its body into a narrow ribbon again. The disturbance was only a garbage truck—but it didn't know that, and through its mind flashed again the torrent of fire! fear! pain! horror!

Without thinking, it rippled to the back of the alley and flowed straight up a wall. When it regained its composure, it found itself on a high place, empty space everywhere around it, open to the frighteningly alien sky.

Something swooped at it from that sky, shining a dazzling light. Something dark and enormous that seemed to skim by just a few feet overhead. The airport was just beyond, and to the residents of that particular flophouse hotel, it often seemed as if the big jets in the landing pattern were brushing their wheels on the roof as they went over.

Again it fled in unknowing panic, pouring itself like a tide of mist across rooftops, up walls, down rusting and dilapidated fire escapes. Instinctively seeking shelter from this nightmare place, it squeezed between the slats of a broken and boarded-up window, and found itself in darkness.

In darkness, it calmed again, its panic fading.

There were heavy, bulky objects around it in the gloom, its spatial sense told it, and gratefully it poured itself under them, working its way as far in as it could. Feeling safer for the sheltering mass above it, it let its mind drift into the neutral looping that served its kind for sleep …

Early the next morning, a neural alarm jolted it back into active mode, and it watched from under a cluster of heavy Victorian furniture—dressers, hunt cabinets, wardrobes, highboys, roll-top mahogany desks: the sheltering masses of the night before—as a man came into the room, a bald-pated man with a frizzy halo of white hair around his ears and a hammer tucked by the claw-end into the breast pocket of his coveralls. It had found refuge in an antique warehouse, a rundown and half-abandoned brick building that had, sometime in the nineteenth century, been a harness-maker's factory. Now the downstairs floor was used as a workshop, while the upper two floors were devoted to the storage of antiques awaiting either renovation or delivery, room after room of dusty furniture, some of which had not been moved or touched in years.

Whistling, the man kicked at a wardrobe, tapped the joints a few times with the hammer, then tipped the wardrobe over so he could work the nails loose from the wood.

It had shrunk away at the close approach of the man's feet. Now it stirred and oozed forward again, sliding under a sideboard, a pharmacist's cabinet, a claw-footed bath basin, pausing finally under an overstuffed damask armchair to observe the workman.

Still whistling, the workman pulled a square of sandpaper from his hip pocket and began to rasp away at the wardrobe.

The fire-of-life was there, the crackling electric interplay of the nervous system …

Hunger stirred in it again, and it felt its mantle stiffen and rise.

Slowly it slid forward …

The workman tucked the sandpaper away in its pocket, picked up the hammer again, and tapped ruminatively at the wardrobe. The wan gray morning light gleamed from his bald head and glinted from his thick eyeglasses as he moved. He was a superstitious man, given to hunches and omens and premonitions, but now, in a supreme bit of irony, with death gliding silently up behind him, he was oblivious to its presence.

Death was a lightless black ribbon that reared up behind him, hooded flat cobra-shaped shadow that loomed over him, paused, and with the slightest involuntary tremble prepared to strike, to reach out to claim him …

Inches from the workman, so close his internal interplay of forces was a tantalizing tickle, it stopped. It stopped, made hesitant by a flicker of the same sort of shadowy, half understood instinct or almost-memory that the night before had taught it how to kill. The pattern of the fire-of-life was complex and intensely bright—this was certainly a sophont, and somehow it knew that killing sophonts could be dangerous if other sophonts learned of the killing, if you alerted them to your presence *by* the killing, especially if you were incautious enough to kill near your own nest or refuge. It was just now beginning to realize how much of its surroundings were artificial, *crafted;* the other night it had seen the buildings and rooftops and alleyways as natural formations, alien mountains and canyons and outcroppings of rock, and only now, replaying the thread of that memory, could it begin to guess how much of all it had seen so far had been *made.*

Created! This spoke of a world of almost unbelievable complexity, a world whose ways would have to be unraveled with patience and

caution, and it dare not endanger the best refuge it had found so far just for a quick and easy kill.

It reversed direction, flowing backward as easily as it had flowed forward, disappearing under a chiffonier.

The workman continued tapping at the wardrobe, as unaware of his reprieve as he had been of his endangerment. As he put the hammer away and fished a screwdriver out of his belt, he began to whistle *Amazing Grace.*

Already deep inside the warehouse, the hammering and whistling fading behind, it sped through the dim and cobwebbed spaces beneath dustcovered harpsichords and mildewing Victorian sofas and wormholed grandfather clocks, seeking out the sealed-off and deserted sections of the building where men never went, seeking safer prey.

It adapted.

There were pigeons by the dozen in the deserted attic of the warehouse, and in the long-unused belvedere, boarded-up sloppily enough to be open to the sky on three sides, there were pigeons by the hundreds. There were cats on the surrounding maze of rooftops, and rats in the alleyways and sewers it learned to hunt by night. There was a little park a few blocks from the warehouse, and there among the trees and bushes it learned to take squirrels and field mice and nesting birds of all sorts. People would bring big dogs to the park and unleash them and let them run, and it took several of those, finding them very satisfactory. It needed a good deal of nourishment, fairly frequently, and finding that nourishment kept it busy.

It stayed hidden by daylight as much as it could, although it soon realized that the native sophonts were unlikely to spot it even then—it blended well with the stained and soot-covered and moss-overgrown walls of the city, and it traveled the roofways where people seldom looked. Electrical appliances and motor vehicles made it uneasy, and it stayed away from them; it had learned early that they were not alive, but their electrical fields touched off strange longings and sudden goosed scurryings of almost-memories that disturbed the placid mental status quo it had established for itself, the easy looping of its mind in ways that did not force it to confront the fear! fire! pain! horror! that always lurked somewhere just below its surface thoughts. It also had a strange effect occasionally on the electric appliances, though it didn't pay any attention to that.

It adapted, the weeks went by, and fall began to solidify into winter.

Prey became harder to find as the days grew colder. It often went hungry. It had made serious inroads on the local dog and cat population—although there were always a few strays drifting in to partially compensate—and many of the pigeons were nesting elsewhere now, having shifted their range for blocks and even miles to avoid the relentless horror that poured like smoke across the gables and ledges and roof-eaves. Even the rats had noticeably thinned out.

One dull gray afternoon it took three children who were playing in the park, and that evening the park and the streets around the park were thick with men with flashlights, too many men to make further hunting possible.

There was also the night that the Northern Lights danced faintly in the sky, and it danced with them, whirling and darting madly on the deserted, icy rooftops under the cold stars, feeling the enormous magnetic fields stir and scramble its emotions even at that great distance.

In that still and freezing night, fey and hungry and half-mad, it left its usual resting place in the ruined belvedere and went down through the building to the warehouse floor, penetrating deep into the tangles of stacked-up furniture, craving the solidity of mass between it and the dancing maddening fires that flared and dimmed on the horizon.

It found a drawer left ajar in a massive dresser that stood upright inside a thick wooden box, and slithered inside. It waited there in the darkness, jittering and buzzing with sick energy, unable to loop its mind into oblivion, nearly insane, occasionally striking furiously and futilely at the smooth wood inside the drawer.

Half an hour later, the white-haired workman entered the warehouse. He had had a hot roast beef sandwich and a couple of knocks of whiskey at the bar on the corner, and now he had one last task to finish up before he knocked off and went home. Taking off his overcoat, he reached over and snapped on his portable radio, but could get nothing out of it but a see-sawing squeal of static. He shrugged and switched it off—the damn thing had been going haywire off and on for a couple of months now, and the phones and the old black-and-white TV in the office had been on the fritz too, now and again. Sunspots, maybe, or some damn microwave relay tower nearby. Fry us in our goddamn jeans

yet, he thought sourly, only dimly aware of the subconscious pun. He gathered up his tools and walked toward the massive packing crate.

A step or two from it, he stopped, and felt a chill shiver up his spine. "Somebody's walking on my grave," he said aloud, the words coming out flat and strange in this familiar place that all at once seemed too big and dark and echoingly empty. Gooseflesh had blossomed on his arms, and he ran his hands down over them to smooth it. There was a big Federal dresser in the crate, already surrounded by wood on three sides. The dresser's bottom drawer was standing ajar, and abruptly, without knowing why, he reached out with the toe of his work shoe and kicked it solidly shut.

Another chill shuddered along his spine, raising the tiny hairs on the back of his neck. It was funny that he'd never noticed how dark and cavernous it was here at night, or how black and spooky the surrounding shadows were.

Shivering, he manhandled the last end of the packing crate into position and began to nail, noticing that he was taking unusual, almost obsessive, care to make sure that the crate was closely and firmly sealed—again without knowing why—as though for some esoteric reason it needed to be airtight. A line from an old church song was running repeatedly through his head: *Amazing grace* ... something something ... *that saved a wretch like me* ...

When the job was done—and he took twice as long about it as he should have taken—but before he turned out the lights and went gratefully home, the workman took out a Magic Marker and on the side of the crate in large, somewhat shaky letters wrote:

Mrs. Alma Kingsley
Maple Hill Farm
Eden Falls, Vermont

"Gamma, there's a truck with men outside."

Alma Kingsley put down her Manhattan on the kitchen counter—carefully, for her arthritis was acting up again—and said to her granddaughter, "Dear child, please *do* endeavor to refrain from calling me 'Gamma' in the future. It makes you sound most deplorably winsome."

Jennifer beamed and laughed, as she did at all of her grandmother's more gravely sententious pronouncements. She didn't know what they meant, but they all sounded funny to her.

Meanwhile, however, the driver of the truck was leaning on his horn, and his assistant was at the tailgate, wrestling an enormous crate onto the lift. "Come, child," Mrs. Kingsley said. "Get your coat. You may find this interesting." She swept into the yard, little Jenny trailing after her like a hyperkinetic pull-toy.

Outside, the day was cold, with a promise of snow in the air—a promise seconded by a sky as uniformly gray and featureless as an old blanket. Beyond the rocky, frozen fields, a fringe of trees marked the ravine separating Maple Hill Farm from the Laferrier place—though their farmhouse was not visible from here. They were isolated, alone among the Green Mountains, and that was the way Alma Kingsley preferred it. She couldn't abide people tromping through here with their problems and their petty jealousies and ambitions. She'd put the world behind her more than a decade ago, when she gave up the editorship of *New England* magazine, and she liked it that way.

As they crossed the yard, a flight of three military jets screamed by, only a couple of hundred feet away, flying very low to the ground, black and sleek and predatory as mechanical sharks. The immense noise of their passing seemed to shake the bones of the world, and everybody looked up, Jennifer waving excitedly, the two workmen staring at them expressionlessly for a moment and then looking away. The jets roared away across the fields, still hugging the ground, afterburners blazing, hopped up over a distant ridge, and were gone. They left a shocked, ringing silence in their wake.

Alma Kingsley compressed her lips and kept walking. She didn't like military planes flying across her land, but there was little point in complaining at a time like this, when she'd only be ignored. They were practicing for war—practicing flying low to the ground to avoid radar, maybe, or perhaps doing mock strafing runs on her barn or the delivery truck. They'd get to try their hand at the real thing soon enough, the way things were going.

Jennifer was babbling happily to her about the planes, but she ignored her. The workmen nodded politely to her, not quite tugging the forelocks they didn't have anyway, and she nodded stiffly back. No one spoke. She gestured for them to unload the big crate, and tugged an inquisitive Jennifer safely out of the way while the lift lowered it ponderously to the ground, and the men grunted it onto a hand-truck.

Iago came bounding up from wherever it is that dogs go, barking furiously at the men, who ignored him. The huge black mongrel ran in frantic circles, from Mrs. Kingsley to the truck and back again, until she had to take him by the collar, swat him on the rump to get his attention, and—pointing firmly downward—order him to "Sit!" He obeyed unhappily, watching the unloading with a worried, disapproving expression.

She supervised the delivery, directing the workmen to take the crate—carefully!—into the old barn, which had once held a few cows and maybe a horse but now had been snugged up and served for storage space. They set the crate down and produced hammers and pry bars, and with a shriek and squeal of protesting nails, the front came off, revealing her newest acquisition, a perfectly lovely piece that she had spotted on her last trip down south and which (not coincidentally) was the spitting image of a dresser her Aunt Dorothy had owned when she was a child, and which she had always, through all the intervening decades, lusted after. It was a triumph of will, her owning this piece, and the fulfillment of a girlhood oath, and she savored it as such.

"Now I'm going to want you to come back Tuesday, after the guests are gone, to place it in the house," she admonished the driver. Then, to her granddaughter, "No, dear, we do *not* root about on the dirty floor like small, ill-mannered swine." And again to the driver, "*Tuesday,* you understand, because I will not have you underfoot with company here. I'll need to decide which furniture to shift, as well."

The driver nodded slowly and, after a pause, said "Yep." There was a quiet censuriousness to his monosyllabic reply, as if it were an admonition to keep her words and reasons to herself. His assistant, chewing on something—either gum or "chaw," probably the latter—jaws agape and about as attractive-looking as a cow at its cud, was wielding his pry bar with abandon, splintering the crate's planks, threatening the absolutely priceless—and irreparable should it be damaged—patina of the wood. Until finally she could not bear to simply watch any longer.

"Hand me that pry," she snapped, and took it away from the gawking youth. There was a correct way to uncrate furniture; you sought out the joints and deftly, even daintily, applied leverage *there,* so that the whole thing popped open like a walnut shell under properly-applied nutcrackers. Brute force was totally unnecessary. And so she would have shown him, only her arthritis chose that instant to seize up, and

her hands became about as useless as clubs, and wouldn't close all the way around the pry. She made a feeble pass or two at the wood, but it was hopeless—the tool slid in her hand, refusing to obey her. She couldn't even *hold* the damnable thing.

She looked up then, and in a timeless instant of glaring horror saw that the driver and his slack-jawed assistant were both staring her with pity in their eyes. Jennifer, thankfully, was too young to comprehend, and stood looking on with innocent curiosity.

For a moment she trembled with humiliation and then, furiously, she flung the pry bar to the floor. Tears flooding her eyes, she gasped, "Oh, *you* do it!" and fled.

Behind her the men quietly, red-facedly, settled the dresser into a dry corner. When it was in place, the driver rubbed it down with his pocket bandana to remove any greasy fingerprints, and swiftly pulled each drawer out a half-inch and back in again, to make sure that none had seized up in transit. He was a conscientious man, and always gave his work this extra bit of care and attention. But he wasn't anxious to linger, and it was entirely understandable that, in his haste, he didn't fully re-close one drawer.

It was dying.

Hunger had driven it to the sharp edge of starvation. It was already seriously sick, or it would have abandoned the dresser immediately upon regaining the mental equilibrium that served it for consciousness. No matter how comfortably enclosed, how nurturing and psychologically sheltering a niche it was, the drawer had proven unsafe. But the long exposure to first one, then another truck's electrical systems had weakened and disoriented it, and filled it with anguished glimpses of something that *was once,* or perhaps *ought to be,* but was now no more. It trembled shiveringly where it was, until the hunger rose up like a wall and forced it out.

Moving as swiftly—as noiselessly—as shifting shadows, it scavenged the barn, a whirlwind of silent wrath, in search of the fire-of-life all living creatures carried within. Up in the rafters it took a clutch of bats, engulfing them before they could stir from their upsidedown perches, and felt better for it, unsatisfied, but no longer so ravenous. Again and again, it scoured the barn, knowing that there should be more prey, and bewildered by its absence.

Frequently it passed by yellow cardboard boxes with grain spilling out from them and of course could not recognize them as bait stations filled with rat poison. But it quickly came to realize that the nourishment it must have would of necessity have to be found outside.

Cautiously, it edged out into the farmyard, slipping easily under the barn door.

And—fire! fear! pain! horror!—found its spatial sense overwhelmed by land that stretched far and away, featureless and with no place to hide, no sheltering masses or deep crannies into which to duck, nothing but rolling, exposed emptiness for hundreds of times its own length. Off to one side was the farmhouse, surrounded by evergreen shrubbery and a few ancient oaks, but it hardly spared that a glimpse in its panicked retreat back into the barn.

Terrified, cold, and hungry, it returned to the half-open drawer to huddle shivering like a wounded animal, its mind looping furiously over and over again and still not easing out the jagged static terror. It waited, because it had to, waited for something to change, for food to come to it, or else for the hunger and need to grow so great that it would be forced out into the openness and emptiness where it currently dared not go.

Mrs. Kingsley was tucking Jennifer into bed when the child's father came up the drive. She carefully bundled the little girl in, first between a pair of flannel sheets, then under a thin electric blanket, and finally—to top it all off—pulling a double wedding ring quilt over all. The quilt was one her mother had made, in point of fact, and Alma Kingsley hoped to live long enough to pass it on to her granddaughter, when the child came of marrying age.

"It's snowing outside," Jennifer said as her grandmother smoothed down the quilt. And then, in that flat, absolutely sincere way children have of presenting their fantasies, she said, "And I saw a Monster from my window."

It was then, in a kind of ironic counterpoint, that the Eldorado purred up the long drive. Jennifer sat up immediately. "Is that Daddy, Gamma?"

Mrs. Kingsley smoothed the child down on the pillow, then turned to look out the window. A few small, bitter flakes of snow were falling from the black sky. They fell fast, a precursor of more to come. The

Eldorado pulled off the drive, which was unnecessary, and onto the house's front yard, which was worse. It was winter and the grass was dead but, still, that kind of treatment *hurt* a lawn.

"Yes, it's your father," she said. The car's front door opened and the man himself spilled drunkenly out. "No, don't get up. I am certain that your father would rather find you tucked angelically into bed than running about caterwauling like a wild heathen Indian. Parents are peculiar in that respect."

Jenny giggled appreciatively, if somewhat sleepily. Outside, the Eldorado's *other* front door swung open.

Alma Kingsley slipped out of the room, snapping off the light. "I'll leave the door open a crack," she said. "Now you just lie there with your eyes closed, so when your father comes in to kiss you goodnight, you can open them and surprise him. Won't that be fun?"

The child nodded slowly, then twisted a bit to dig her cheek into the pillows.

"Sweet dreams," Mrs. Kingsley murmured.

She went downstairs to confront the father.

Iago came padding out from the kitchen as she threw a jacket over her thin shoulders against the terrible cold outside. He stood by her side, anxious with doggish worries of his own, as she flung the front door open. Desmond stood on the stoop, one arm flung around his roadhouse floozy's neck, grappling vaguely for her breasts, and the other digging through his pockets—with equal incompetence—in search of the door key. He gaped up stupidly at her.

"How *dare* you?" she whispered, so as not to wake the child. "Your own daughter is in this house." The snow was falling more thickly now, slanting down fast and tightly together, filling the air. The air was so full of snowflakes you could choke on them. If you listened carefully, you could hear them hit, it was so quiet. A whispery, slithery sound.

Desmond released the woman. He looked directly into Alma Kingsley's eyes, possibly the first time he had done so since arriving at Maple Hill Farm. "You sanctimonious old bag," he said quietly, also unwilling to disturb the child. "Stephanie died over a year ago. And you know something? A year is a long time to go without. You'd know that yourself, if you could remember that far back ..."

The floozy—her hair was that hideous aniline red that positively shrieked its artificiality—hung back, embarrassed. Or maybe not; she

gaped up at them, as vacant-faced as a cow. Mrs. Kingsley didn't spare her a second glance.

"I will not tolerate having the morals of a child corrupted within my house!" She moved to slam the door shut in his face.

The father caught the door with one hand, and effortlessly held it open. He was a short, heavy man, with a dirty little fringe of beard. About as far from the Kingsley type as you could get, but a strong creature nevertheless. For an instant she thought he was going to actually strike her, could almost feel the pain, the old bones cracking under porcelain skin … But he didn't. He just grinned, a mean, drunken grin. "I don't *like* bringing Jenny up here twice a year," he said. "I only did it for Stephanie's sake, when she was alive, and now for Jenny. She likes being on your farm. But I'll tell you this—either you let us in or this is the fucking *last* time you ever see the child again."

She stood motionless in the doorway, losing heat to the out-of-doors while Desmond leered up at her. The snow was gathering already, a light powder-sugar frosting on the bare and frozen ground. The wind was already sweeping it to and fro. The air was cold on her face and it seemed to her that so long as she didn't move, she could hold back the future, keep from ever *having* to move, keep from slipping into a situation where she had lost control, where she was defeated before she even began.

At her heel, the dog whined plaintively. "Hush, Iago," she said automatically.

She moved aside.

In the morning she set out four plates for breakfast—the good Spode china, too, as pointed a bit of formality as it was possible to give a guest. She considered turning on the big plug-in radio on the kitchen counter, all the company she had most mornings as she cooked a solitary breakfast for herself, but there was a delicious quiet and serenity out here this morning, the snow now falling heavily but without sound close outside the window, like a slow fall of feathers, muting the daylight and filling it with shifting highlights, so that it was like being all alone in a bubble on the bottom of the sea. She hated to shatter that peacefulness with noise before it needed to be shattered; Desmond would be down and rattling the china with his booming, cheaply genial voice soon enough.

Besides, there wouldn't be much worth listening to on the radio anyway. Sometimes she could pull in WGBH from Boston in the mornings and listen to chamber music or string quartets, but for months now there'd been too much static from all the sunspot activity to tune it in clearly, and all she'd been able to get for the last few days were somberly hysterical talk-radio stations yattering on about the current international crisis, lines being drawn in the sand, frantic diplomatic efforts, troops massing at borders, military alerts, security advisories, leaves being canceled, aircraft carriers on the move, and so on—and she was sick to the teeth of that. All the familiar stuff, saber-rattling, jingoism, the vitriolic outpourings of suddenly acceptable racism toward people we were supposed to *like* only a few months before. Primate Aggressive Displays, chimps hooting at each other and beating their breasts until they had worked themselves up into enough of a lather to attack. It seemed like she'd been hearing this stuff all her long life, one conflict after another, one enemy after another, and she was sick of it. Let them have their war and leave her alone, here in her own kitchen. She didn't have to listen to them *talk* about it!

"Hi, Gamma!" It was Jennifer, down first, chirpy-happy as usual, practically bouncing with enthusiasm. Remember when you had that much energy? Mrs. Kingsley thought wryly. Remember when you had a *fourth* of it? She let Jennifer help by setting out the silverware and napkins, while she fried up eggs and sausages and piles of French toast, all in an iron skillet with lots of Crisco.

The second one up was her son-in-law's roadhouse pick-up. She slumped down on a chair, eyes bleary under smeared makeup. Her hair was done in that kind of razor-cut where you can never tell if it's brushed or not. "Morning," she mumbled. She picked up a fork and stared at it, turning it over and over in her hand, as if she'd never seen Grand Baroque silver before in her life, and were searching for a clue to its purpose.

Sliding breakfast in front of her, Mrs. Kingsley was struck by the horrible realization that this young chippie was somebody's daughter, and probably came down to the breakfast table in exactly the same sullen way every morning, with grumbled greeting and averted eyes. Maybe she hadn't even noticed yet that she hadn't made it home the night before.

"It snowed *two feet* last night," the child announced. "Gamma says maybe it'll snow all day today, right, Gamma?" Then, when Gamma didn't reply, "My name's Jennifer, what's yours?"

The woman stared at Jennifer, as if the girl had been suddenly and without warning plopped down out of the sky before her. "Candy," she said at last.

The child's father chose that moment to make his appearance. He lifted Jennifer out of her chair, hugged her, and held her up in the air while she squealed. Then he peered out the window. "Still coming down, eh?" He whistled. "Look at that drift over by the barn! Jesus!"

Desmond was wearing jeans and a green football jersey with white sleeves and a double-zero numeral on the back. Bits of lint were stuck in his beard; it would never have occurred to him to brush it before breakfast. He took a sip from the coffee cup that had been awaiting him for the past ten minutes, ever since she'd heard himself clumping about overhead, and made a face. "Could you warm this thing up for me?"

Wordlessly, she took the cup from him, put it into the microwave, and switched the device on.

"Hey, wait a minute!" Candy looked up suddenly. "How deep did you say it was out there?" She went to the window and pushed the curtain aside. "Oh, no!" she groaned. "How am I going to get home through all that?"

"The plows will be by when the snow stops," Mrs. Kingsley said. "But this isn't a primary route, and while it's falling they're going to keep most of their machines out on the Interstate."

"My mom is going to have a *cow!* Where's the telephone?"

"In the hallway," Desmond said, and she hurried off without even pausing to ask permission.

A motion in the corner of her eye caught Alma Kingsley's attention then, and she suddenly remembered the coffee in the microwave. Brown liquid was bulging ominously over the cup's lip. Hurriedly she cut off the device, and it subsided. The cup was nice and warm; half the flavor was boiled out, but no need to mention *that.* She set it down in front of Desmond.

The young woman returned, throwing herself down into the chair with a kind of heavy despair. "I can't get through. There's this static and a kind of whooping noise, and nothing goes through."

"More than likely something wrong at the switching facilities," Mrs. Kingsley said. "The phone service here's never been much to brag about."

Candy worried a pack of cigarettes and a disposable lighter out of her disco bag and accusingly said, "Well, my mother is going to have a cow."

Mrs. Kingsley personally thought that the girl's mother's outrage was a day late and a dollar short, but she kept her opinion to herself. Aloud, she said, "No, my dear, I am afraid that I do not allow smoking at the breakfast table."

"Hah?" Candy looked down stupidly, lit the cigarette, and then hastily removed it from her mouth. "Oh—yeah, sure." She made as if to stub out the cigarette on her plate. Mrs. Kingsley hastily reached into the cupboards for an ashtray.

"Here." She thrust it at the young woman. It was ironic, the tyranny that smokers exercised over their betters. She herself had never picked up the disgusting habit, and yet had of necessity, over the years, acquired any number of ashtrays to accommodate friends and guests. "You can smoke in the hallway," she said. "Though it would be *nice* if you were to go outside when—"

But an angry glance from Desmond told her that she had gone too far. "Well, that would be unreasonable, of course."

"Damn straight it would," Desmond muttered. He was at the kitchen radio now, fiddling with it. It emitted an earsplitting, see-sawing howl of static, like a dying banshee. Wincing, he turned the knob from one end of the dial to the other, finding no stations, then grimaced and turned the radio off. He started to say "Shit!", cast a quick look at his daughter, thought better of it, and settled for an exasperated "Damn!" He came back to the table. "I'd hoped to catch the news."

"War, and portents of war," Mrs. Kingsley said sourly.

Desmond grinned offensively at her. "Hey, sounds good to *me!*" he said. "That means I don't have to worry about being out of work, right?" He knew that she disapproved of his work for military contractors—"war work" she'd called it bitterly once, in a monumental argument a few months after Stephanie's death, correcting his euphemistic "defense work"—and he loved to bait her about it.

"There's a television in the living room," she said stiffly. "We get CNN even out here in the boondocks. Just keep the volume down. I don't care to hear it."

He shook his head. "You'd think you'd want to know what's going on. There's a *crisis* underway! Don't you care what happens?"

Mrs. Kingsley hesitated, and glanced toward Jennifer, but she and the roadhouse floozie were busy playing dolls with each other with the salt and pepper shakers; obviously Jennifer had found a companion on her own level of emotional development. "I don't care what happens anymore," she said, keeping her voice pitched low. "Let them have their war. Let them all kill each other. Unless they drop an H-bomb on Montpelier, I don't intend to take any notice of it."

Desmond made a disgusted face. "You've got your head in the sand! You think the real world is going to go away just because you don't like it? You have to deal with things as they *are*. *Do* something about them! If there weren't so many people who think like you, maybe Stephanie would still be alive."

They glared at each other, locking gazes. He'd stepped over the line, though, and he knew it, for, after a moment, he had the grace to look faintly embarrassed. Her gaze, though, was unflinching and unforgiving.

At that moment, opportunely, there was a scratching at the door, and she had to go let the dog back in.

"O base Iago! O inhuman dog!" she declaimed as the mutt bounded in. Candy stared at her uncomprehendingly. The little chit had probably never even heard of Shakespeare.

Iago was jumping up on her, panting and enthusiastically trying to wag his entire body. She looked deliberately at Desmond. "Let slip the dogs of War, eh?" she said, and smiled sweetly. She knew *he'd* heard of Shakespeare.

It was weakening. Perhaps it held enough reserves for another day or so, if it husbanded its resources. But that way lay oblivion and slow death; to survive it needed to strike out, to forage away from the comforting shelter of the barn, out into the flat, horribly open countryside.

It was hesitating by the door when the sound of trudging footsteps approached, heading straight for it.

Jerking back as if struck, it rose up, mantle stiffening, ready to attack. Then caution took over, and it retreated swiftly to the shadows, hunkering down into the darkest corner, every sense on edge, waiting, observing.

The door rattled, then flew open. Two sophonts stepped into the barn, accompanied by a wild skirl of snowflakes. They slammed the door shut noisily, and stamped their boots clear of snow.

It listened carefully to words it could not comprehend.

"I don't think your mother-in-law likes me."

"Don't take it personally. The old bat doesn't like anyone."

Stealthily, slowly, it moved. Keeping to the shadows and edges, it made its way to a wide support beam beyond the direct perception of the sophonts. Swiftly, it flowed up the beam's far side, up to the loft, and then to the rafters, just below the ridgepole. Given the choice, it was always best to strike from above.

It moved cautiously, always conscious of the gentle tickle of the fire-of-life below.

The shorter of the two produced fire. Smoke snarled through the cold air. It could not smell, of course, but it sensed the smoke as a flicker of ionized charges.

"Whew—I really needed that!" the shorter one said. She sucked in the ions again, letting them damp down within her lungs. "Here, have a toke."

The taller one made a disgusted noise. "Is that what we came out here for? To get stoned?"

Silently it moved among the rafters, flowing from brace to joist, and across the collar beams, until it was in position, directly above its prey. It rested invisibly over them, and prepared to strike.

The shorter one laughed. "What did you expect? I hope you didn't think I was going to screw you out in *this* weather."

But they were both sophonts and sophonts were dangerous. It would have to take both of them to be safe, and it wasn't at all certain it could do that. Its reserves of strength were perilously low.

"I thought you had something you wanted to tell me. Let's go back inside, okay? It's too cold to stand out here smoking that shit."

"Damnit, I'm going to *need* this to get me through the afternoon. Did you see the way she was eyeing me at lunch?"

"Yeah, well, I've got a daughter back there in the house and I'd like to preserve a few of her illusions about her old man for a while longer, okay? So if you'll excuse me, I don't see any reason why I should hang around out here in the cold."

And then, incredibly, there was only one! The other sophont slammed out through the door, and his footsteps faded away rapidly in the falling snow.

It gathered itself together to strike. The distance was not great, and it was starting from an ideal position. With effort, it suppressed a tremble of excitement in its stiffening mantle.

The woman below huddled disconsolately in her parka. She sucked in a lungful of ions, and held them.

It struck.

"Gamma, where's Candy?"

The parlor was very quiet without the television or radio on—Alma Kingsley had tried them both (with Desmond coming right behind her and trying them again, as if she didn't know how to turn a television set on properly), and they wouldn't work right; sunspots or something—they had been very bad all this year, with the Northern Lights stronger and more frequent than she'd ever known them to be in all the years since she'd retired from the magazine—had scrambled all incoming signals. The phone still wasn't working either, and Desmond had gotten quite agitated—uselessly—about not being able to get in touch with the office. The rest of the morning had, to say the least, been tense. Desmond had finally retreated into his work, getting lost in that annoying way that he had, going so deep into it that nobody, not even Jennifer, not even Stephanie when she'd been alive, could reach him.

She put down her copy of *Paris Match,* and said, "I don't know, child. Somewhere in the house, I should imagine. Why don't you ask your father?"

"She's *not* in the house," the child insisted. "I wanted her to play Barbie-doll with me, and I looked everywhere."

Desmond looked up from a briefcase full of flow charts and printouts and other tools of his arcane trade. "Hmmm?" he said. And when the problem was explained to him, "She ought to be back from the barn by *now*." With a sigh, he switched off his calculator, set down his ballpoint pen, and stood. "Now where did I leave my coat?"

Iago bounded up eagerly when Desmond opened the door, and insisted on following him out into the snow. The door slammed, and Iago's excited barking faded as they headed toward the old barn.

Five minutes later, Desmond returned, carrying Candy's body.

Mrs. Kingsley saw him coming from the kitchen window and—with a smothered exclamation of horror—hurried to throw open the door for him. Together they hurried into the parlor and laid Candy down on a couch.

It was possible now to assess the damage that had been done the woman. Her features were unnaturally sunken, the cheeks collapsed in on themselves, drawing the lips back from the teeth, and her stomach was literally concave, looking like someone had punched it in with his fist. An ugly purple flush was still spreading over her face as hundreds of ruptured capillaries lost blood.

"She was just lying there!" Desmond said helplessly. "Like she'd had a heart attack or something. Is the phone still out? We need a doctor. Maybe I can … I could hike out to the road and flag down a car."

Alma Kingsley put a finger under the girl's nostrils. She touched her wrists, forehead, chest. She pressed down a fingernail, looked at the color.

"Desmond," she said, "it's too late."

She straightened, and her son-in-law did likewise, both involuntarily drawing away from the body, as if by so doing they could distance themselves from death. When she glanced away, Mrs. Kingsley saw that Jennifer was standing in the middle of the parlor rug, eyes wide and calm, staring at the corpse.

"Daddy," she said, "is Candy dead?"

Her father got a sick expression on his face, as if he'd been called upon to explain sex and reproduction to the child *right now,* with no blushing and no preparation. But he answered, voice flat and superficially composed, "Yes."

"Like on TV?"

Alma Kingsley regained control then, and gathered the two up. With a push here, a nudge there, she shooed father and daughter out of the parlor and into the kitchen. At her command, Iago followed. Then she closed the door.

To survive, it had to get into the farmhouse. It knew that now, with a kind of animal cunning that came before reason and intellect. There were sophonts within, and it was practically suicidal to attack a sophont within its own lair. But they were few in number, and they were iso-

lated from their own kind. And while they were danger, they were *also* nourishment.

It hesitated at the doorway of the shed, baffled by the snow that had already drifted above the middle hinges. Then it flowed up the wall, climbing to the crack at the top of the doorway, and eased through. Halfway out it halted, stunned by how the world had been transformed. The falling snow formed complex, shifting patterns that disappeared the instant it got a fix on them. It was as if the world had been shredded and divided into component atoms, then instantly rearranged, again and again, a thousand times a second. All anew, it was struck by the sheer alienness of this world, where nothing was certain, where everything shifted and moved and changed. It wavered, flowed outward, flinched back again. Individual flakes of snow touched its surface, did not melt, slid off without sticking.

Had anyone been watching from the house, they would have seen it then, carelessly, dangerously exposed. But occupied as they were with their own troubles, no one was looking.

It advanced out onto the snow then, all in a rush, sudden and brave. Midway between barn and house it halted. Nothing happened. It found it could partially filter out the flakes falling, though they disoriented and bewildered it still. Purposefully it set out for the farmhouse, a solid mass of potential shelter, unchanging, shot through with electrical fires and harboring at its heart the precious rumor of fire-of-life.

But the task it had set for itself was not an easy one; the house had been winterized with typical Yankee thoroughness. Caulk had been applied around every window and door frame, and a long, even bead had been drawn at the juncture where clapboarding met foundation. Cracks in the masonry had been plastered over, and every window was double-paned and covered over with storm windows, every door had weatherstripping.

It circled the house without finding entrance. The building was tight, invulnerable to it. There might be entrances up above—experience said it was likely to find chimney pots and furnace exhausts, gable vents, even the occasional hatchway—but it dared not climb the house side, up into the swirling, shifting snow, where matter and sky intermingled. It could not have been sure of maintaining its orientation, of knowing where the house left off and the air began. It was madness to even consider it.

Time and again it lashed silently around the house, skimming the surface of the snow, leaving behind it the very thinnest layer of ice, a trail that disappeared almost instantaneously under the new falling snow. It was perilously exposed, and this added to its confusion and desperation, to its determination to try *anything,* no matter how rash or foolhardy, that might help it to survive.

Even after Desmond had finally bowed to the inevitable and taken Candy's corpse out to the Eldorado, where it could await the snowplows and the doctor and the coroner in the preserving cold, there was an eerie pall cast over the house. Jennifer had been put to bed early, and the adults had retired to the kitchen, to try to talk.

But there was nothing to say. There was no way Candy could have died, and speculation would not explain the inexplicable—only the autopsy could do that. And she was a stranger, so there could be no reminiscences about her, none that Alma Kingsley would care to have Desmond share, anyway. So, in the end, they simply fell silent. Mrs. Kingsley began going through her cookbooks, and Desmond fell to punching listlessly on the keys of his calculator.

"What is wrong with that dog?" Alma Kingsley grumbled in exasperation. Iago was pacing the kitchen floor, infinitely restless, his claws going click-click-click on the linoleum. Now he was at the door again, pushing at the crack between door and sill with his nose, digging at it hopelessly with his claws, scratching and whining.

"Sounds like he wants to be let out," Desmond said without looking up.

"Well, maybe I should," she said at last. Throwing a wrap over herself, she took hold of Iago's collar, and led him to the door. Her intent was to shove his nose outside and give him a whiff of the cold, and then draw him back in again. That ought to have settled his restlessness. But when the door opened, he strained forward, barking furiously, even anxiously, and she saw something outlined on the snow in the rectangle of light cast by the open door. She squinted and said, "Desmond, come here. Take a look at this."

The dog's feet scrabbled wildly on the floor, but her grip was firm. "Look at what?" Desmond said. He ambled up, calculator in hand, and peered over her shoulder. "That's just a patch of shadow."

"There never was a patch of shadow shaped like that there *before*," Mrs. Kingsley said dubiously. A momentary twinge of arthritis hit her then, and her hold on Iago's collar loosened.

All hell broke loose.

It lay watching, not knowing that it did not blend in against the snow, assuming that the sophonts' awareness would be as dazzled by the downfalling flakes as was his own.

It had flattened against the snow's surface the instant that the door opened with a great outrushing of warmth. The shifts of ionization and static charges in the air made the doorway a shimmering beacon, bright and inviting, and only the faint, almost undetectable flickers of fire-of-life within that wash of liquid warmth kept it from leaping forward at that very instant. Wary, it crouched, waiting.

Then the dog came flying through the air to attack it.

The beast was large and fierce, plowing through and scattering snow, howling and barking as it came. Terrified, the creature fled, but—cunning, desperate—it fled straight for the door, risking everything on a frontal attack, a savage, killing assault on whatever might lie in its path.

In the doorway, the black beast ravening and almost upon it, its perception cleared, and it found that only two enemies stood between it and shelter. The first fell aside, shrinking back against the wall as it charged forward, and it could ignore her, making for the second who was just beyond her, and who was bigger, with more fire-of-life in him.

Berserk, it sprang at the man, who stumbled back, involuntarily flinging up a hand to fend it off. There was an object in that hand, a glittering complex of resistance paths that held a shimmering, shifting structure of energies, a vastly simplified and purified version of what lay within living beings.

A concept came searing up from the shuttered and forbidden parts of its mind, breaking through the pain: WEAPON! WEAPON! WEAPON! and it turned in midair, reshaping its structure and seizing hold of a wall so that it slammed aside and away from the thing. The beast leaped up after it, and for an instant almost had it, and then it fled down the hall and away.

In terror and wild confusion it was driven through several rooms and up a stairway. It took the first opening off of the hall it could find,

and discovered itself in a cul-de-sac, the air all abuzz with jittery white energy, and dominated by a large, painful glow in its center.

The beast halted, hackles rising. It was cornered, and the beast knew it.

"What was *that?*" Desmond gasped.

Alma Kingsley shook her head. Her breath was still short, her face felt pallid with shock, and she discovered that she was clutching at her heart. Disdainful of her own weakness, she forced the hand down. Then, looking up at where Iago's frantic baying had come to an abrupt stop, she felt seized with terror and cried, "Jennifer!"

Desmond easily outdistanced her, but she arrived in the guest bedroom practically on his heels. To her unutterable relief, the child was unharmed, sitting up sleepily in her bed and looking at the frantic Iago with dull, unfocused interest. Her father swept her up in a hug, and backed away, into the hallway. Oddly enough, Alma Kingsley felt a pang of jealousy.

Iago had cornered the creature.

Whatever it was—and in the gloom it was all but invisible—it crouched in the shadows to the far side of the four-poster, alert and quivering, frightened and dangerous. It reared up and slowly dipped down as Iago darted forward, then back, then forward again, growling and making little feinting attacks. The combination of quick and mazy movements made the fight look like a confrontation between cobra and mongoose.

The creature was trapped in the aisle between bed and wall. To its rear was a closet, its door open on a thick-packed rank of summer dresses in their plastic dry-cleaning bags. Jennifer's jumper hung by itself on a hook on the back of the door.

Mrs. Kingsley was just reaching—belatedly, she realized—for the light switch when Iago attacked. Snapping and foaming, he charged. The two went tumbling, one over the other. Shaking his head fiercely, Iago backed out of the narrow way, dragging out the creature between his jaws, struggling.

Iago snarled savagely as he tore at the creature, and then there was an ozone crackle in the air and he yelped, a high, heartbreaking cry. His stiffening body crashed over sideways, onto the floor, and did not move.

The creature disentangled itself instantly, feinted at Desmond, then turned again and—going carefully around rather than over the bed—rushed into the closet.

There was an access panel in the back of the closet. It had been installed early in the century, when the upstairs water closet was retrofitted, and opened into the wall and a few dusty pipes. The panel was ajar slightly, leaning loosely rather than snugly. Perhaps the child had been playing with it, looking for a secret passageway, or perhaps it had been left partly open for years or even decades without anyone ever bothering to get around to straightening it.

The creature squeezed through the crack, quick and impossibly fluid, and disappeared into the wall.

Slowly, awkwardly, Mrs. Kingsley squatted down, knees almost touching the floor. She laid a hand on her dog's head. He was dead. "Oh, Iago," she said. "My little *bête noire.*"

She began to cry.

The house was a maze of electric circuits and appliances. They dizzied and blinded it, dazzling and baffling its senses. The sophonts were somewhere within this maze, and it did not even know how many they were. It only knew that they had not followed it, and thus presumably *could* not. But the sophonts' lair was a dangerous environment, naturally hostile to it, and it fled.

It fled deep, sinking downward by instinct, tracing a tortuous way between walls and floors, sometimes following water pipes, and always avoiding electrical wires. Carefully, fearfully, it threaded its way along a twisty path that led downward, ever downward.

Finally it emerged into warm, cavernous darkness, and knew it had found refuge.

Iago was dead, but Jennifer was alive; there was comfort in that. The faithful old family retainer had given up his life in defense of home and child, and that was somehow fitting. It was the way things ought to be. His corpse was outside the kitchen door now, packed in snow because the frozen earth made burial impossible, but Alma Kingsley vowed that her great-grandchildren would know his name.

The snow had finally stopped, and the night was clear, and bitterly cold, the stars burning in it like chips of ice. The great glowing,

shimmering billowing curtains of the Northern Lights were out, shifting restlessly back and forth on the horizon, brighter than she had ever seen them, so bright that it almost seemed that she could burn her hand on them, if she held it out to the sky.

It had been quite a storm. It must have dumped at least four feet of snow on the region all told, snowing through the night and through the day and through most of the night again, and the driveway beyond the lee of the house was buried under huge drifts; you couldn't even see the highway at its end. So much for her first thought, which was to bundle them all into Desmond's car and make a run for it, abandoning the house to the creature until they could come back later with help. To get the hell *out* of here!

But with all that snow, nobody was going anywhere, life-or-death emergency or not, until the snowplow came by in the morning. It was physically impossible. And if they locked themselves in the car as a refuge—her second thought—they'd freeze to death before daybreak. And besides, who was to say that it couldn't get into the car after them, the way it seemed to be able to squeeze itself through the smallest of cracks?

"Did you notice that it was afraid of my pocket calculator?" Desmond asked. He was pacing the length of the kitchen, back and forth, from the pantry door to the wooden cot they had set up for Jennifer by the refrigerator. "And it wouldn't touch the electric blanket either."

"Why is that?" Mrs. Kingsley asked without interest. Her granddaughter was sleeping like an angel, and her heart pounded with fear for the child. She had to fight down the impulse to run a rough old hand over hair so fine it could break your heart.

"I don't know, but did you see the way it squeezed into the wall? Like it was boneless, or something more than boneless. I'll bet it doesn't mass much of anything at all!"

He was getting excited now. Alma Kingsley simply tuned out his voice and let him rant on. Stephanie had always said that problem-solving was his *forte,* what he was most at home with. Given a logic problem—a crossword puzzle or a program that had crashed—and some shred of clue, his intuition would worry it to death or solution. To Alma Kingsley's way of thinking, this was a good argument that problem-solving logic was not one of the civilized skills.

It was only when he moved her brand new toaster-over to the kitchen table and began disassembling it, that she was finally moved to object. "Just what the hell do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

"I'm going to wrap a resistance coil," he said, absorbed in his chore and talking so fast his words ran together. "Look, this thing is obviously sensitive to electromagnetic radiation, right? Now, assuming its shape is maintained through bound charges, then it would move by shifting electrical potential within itself. That would explain how it moves so fluidly. So—"

"Desmond," she said, her patience wearing thin, "just what are you trying to do?"

He looked up from his work, puzzled. "I'm building a signal-interrupter. Didn't I make myself clear?" Without waiting for a response, he bent back down over the table, uncoiling wires from the heating elements.

She closed her eyes, calmed herself. "Just what will this signal-interrupter do when it's built?"

"Well, basically—" He broke something out of the toaster-oven, glanced at it, threw it aside. "Basically, it ought to render this creature totally immobile anywhere within—oh, let's say a fifteen–twenty foot radius. More, probably, but that much at least."

For the first time in her life, Alma Kingsley wondered if God might not have had reasons for creating Desmond. "You can do this?" she asked anxiously. "Tonight?"

He favored her with a vulgar, lopsided grin. "Old hoss," he said, "give me half an hour, and we have got it dicked!"

With no warning, all the lights went out at once, plunging them into complete darkness.

"Oh shit," Desmond said.

Calmly, because she'd been through blackouts before, Mrs. Kingsley felt and twisted the knobs on the gas range. One by one the burners came on, filling the room with an eerie, flickering light.

By sheer bad luck, the furnace was off at the instant the power went. It was a gas furnace, but it operated off of a solid-state programmable electric thermostat, and wouldn't go back on again until the thermostat told it to. But it wasn't really crucial; she lit the oven, leaving the door open for heat.

After some clumsy, fearful rummaging through the dark pantry, she unearthed a hurricane lamp. Its chimney had gulls painted on the side, and the transparent reservoir was filled with blue scented soil. Still, when she set it on the kitchen table, the light it shed was warm and friendly, and she could turn off the range.

Desmond, meanwhile, had found the utility flashlight in its recharger bracket by the basement door. He stood in the middle of the pantry, flicked it on and off, and then said, "What does this house have—fuses or circuit breakers?"

Alma Kingsley stared at the man in disbelief. His face was dark with shadow, his eyes lost in blackness. He was a silhouette creature, almost all outline and no substance, one hand on the doorknob of the cellar door. "Desmond, this isn't the city. A power line is down. Going into the cellar and flicking a switch is not going to restore the electricity."

She didn't have to be able to see the face to know the smug, superior smile that crossed it now; she could hear it in his voice. "Let's not get all worked up, now. *Maybe* a line is down. But the more likely reason is that a power transient has kicked out the main circuit breaker. There's no reason for us to spend a night in the cold and dark when just a moment's effort can restore the power." He opened the door.

She peered past him, down into the cellar—it was a perfect, lightless black. Vague colors swam before her, visual hallucinations brought up by the absolute lack of light. The blackness crawled with menace. The only sound anywhere was the hissing of the gas oven.

Involuntarily, she clutched his arm. "For God's sake, Desmond, you don't know what's down there!"

Desmond turned the flashlight on her face. She stood blinking as he studied her. "Don't be such a wuss," he said. "Whatever that thing is, we know that it's somewhere *above* us, not below."

He shook free of her grip and moved to the top of the cellar steps, hesitated for a moment, looking down. "Desmond," she said, so frightened that she found herself actually pleading, "this is *unwise*. You're acting like a character in a monster movie! Everybody in the theater would be yelling 'Don't go down there!' by this point. Stay up here with us. We need you here." It galled her to speak the words, words she'd never imagined she'd hear herself say—but it was true.

Desmond turned his head to look back at her, and grimaced. "Look," he said, a defensive note creeping into his voice, "this thing *kills* people,

and it's on the loose. The only defense we have against it uses electricity. Either I go down there and reset the breakers, or we sit up here in the dark and wait to die." After a second of silence, he grinned at her, the arrogance, the boundless self-confidence and self-assurance she'd always found so odious in the man already returning to his face after a fleeting moment of uncertainty. "Beside, I'll be quick … and I'll be careful!"

He was wrong, horribly wrong, but she didn't have the arguments to confute him with, only a horrid assurance that he was making a stupid move. Desmond shone the flash down the stairs.

A thin line of worn wooden treads led downward into darkness, a trace of light glimmering on the walls to either side. When Desmond raised the flash slightly, a pale circle formed on the whitewashed rock wall just beyond the landing. "Damn," he muttered. "I don't suppose the circuit box is on the near wall?"

"No, it's on the wall opposite, at the front of the house."

Abruptly, Desmond turned and walked back into the kitchen. For a giddy moment, Mrs. Kingsley thought he had come to his senses. But he only paused by his daughter and gently placed something on the cot beside her sleeping head. The calculator. He switched it on, then turned back toward the cellar.

"For the love of Christ, Desmond!"

But, ignoring her completely, he stepped down onto the top stair. It groaned under his weight. Slowly he descended, clutching the loose railing with his free hand. The light danced and bobbed on the basement wall, growing brighter as he approached, then darting to the side and disappearing as he turned away. Briefly, there was the faintest shimmer of reflected light, and then nothing.

The air from below was warm, like an animal's breath on her face. Staring down into the liquid blackness, Mrs. Kingsley felt her every nerve on end. She strained to hear, to track her son-in-law's progress below by sound alone. But the dirt floor muffled his footsteps, and damped down the noise he made.

"Desmond?" she said softly. He did not answer. Her own breath sounded loud to her; she could make out nothing above it. It was uncanny how silent the cellar was. It was as if the darkness were a gigantic beast that moved on soft paws to swallow up the least sound.

Then Desmond stumbled into a pile of cardboard boxes filled with old paint and coffee cans that she had put away years ago against some

possible future need. A jar fell to the floor. He kicked it angrily, and it skittered and skipped away to shatter against the wall. "Fuck."

Mrs. Kingsley leaned down into the stairway. The darkness was so deep, so absolute, it seemed to want to suck her down into it. It welled up dizzyingly about her, and she had to put out a hand to steady herself against the jamb.

Silence again. Then—

"Found it!" Desmond shouted. He sounded relieved; one presumed the darkness had finally gotten to him. There were faint noises as he poked about. "Jeez, this is an old system. Look at the rust on it. I'll bet you ten to one I—"

He gasped.

The flashlight clattered noisily to the ground. For an instant there was silence, complete and profound. Then a kind of throbbing electrical hum rose to fill the darkness. Over the throbbing came other sounds, choking and thrashing sounds, as if Desmond were having a seizure. The noise went on and on.

And then it stopped.

The silence seemed to echo, like the air just after a great bell has been stilled. Fearfully, Alma Kingsley called down, "Desmond? Desmond, are you all right?" She waited, and heard nothing. "Desmond?"

A faint slithering noise whispered up from below. It wasn't quite like anything she had ever heard before, and yet it definitely came from a living creature. It was coming from the far side of the cellar, and it was headed right for the stairway.

Frantically, she slammed the door shut, and backed away, into the warmth and light of the kitchen. For an instant's frozen horror, she was convinced it would follow her. But it did not.

"Gamma?"

Jennifer was sitting up in bed, sleepily rubbing one eye. It was clear that the door slamming had wakened her. "Gamma," she said. "Where's Daddy?"

It had fled as far as it could, as deep as it was possible to go in this labyrinthine structure, and had thought itself safe. It badly needed to think things through, as a dozen conflicting emotions chased themselves through its neural fabric, and at that point wanted only solitude, darkness, stillness, the security of enclosure. But then, terrifyingly, one of

the sophonts had come *after* it, tracking it down, coming relentlessly closer and closer and closer, a buzzing electrical device that emitted a spray of photons—a weapon?—in one hand. It had backed away in terror, retreating as the man came on toward it step by step, finally stopping only when it backed up against a solid wall and there was no place left to go without turning and exposing its back to a potentially fatal attack.

Still the man came implacably on, ever closer, ponderous steps shaking the floor like thunder, looming huge and heavy and menacing, only a few body-lengths away now. At last, still moving forward, the sophont turned the stream of photons from its device/weapon directly *on* it ...

Trapped, terrified, knowing that it might only have seconds of life left in which to act, it struck. The sophont jerked and thrashed and flailed, the electrical device flying from its hand to shatter against the floor and go out.

It had tried its best to avoid this confrontation, had not wanted to kill again so soon, had wanted to think about the whole situation, but it had been given no choice.

None of those considerations kept it from feeding as fully as it could, of course, now that it *had* killed. The sophont was big and vigorous, in the prime of its cycle of existence, and was full of the fire-of-life.

When it had finished with him, it felt refreshed and somewhat calmer ... although, almost immediately, a new unease began to grow within it. This was a bad situation, trapped inside a structure like this with a band of sophonts, all alerted to its presence. It was a dangerous situation, one in which it could easily be trapped or attacked—and there was something *else* about the situation that dimly troubled it, something other than the danger, something that generated another kind of unease. It shouldn't be hunting sophonts, it knew that somehow, not unless it had no other choice. It should find other, easier, less dangerous prey, like the rats and squirrels and birds it'd found in the park. To find nonsophont prey instead would be far less dangerous, and it would *also* be, it would also be ... something. Something it no longer had the concept for, but which it vaguely knew was desirable.

Yes, it should leave here, get out of this situation altogether.

So it hunted through the structure until it found access to a metal pipe that it followed up through the walls and out onto the roof, out

into the chill outer air … But there were the Northern Lights, blazing above it, filling the sky, curtains of dancing, shimmering radiation, seemingly only a few feet above its head, dazzling it, making it squirm and caper and thrash, coil and uncoil and coil, scribing odd cabalistic patterns in the snow … until, on the verge of total madness, it retreated back into the pipe, plunging deep into the reassuringly solid structure of the house, where at least the sheer mass of all the stone and wood and iron afforded it some protection against the shifting, chaotic, maddening lights in the sky.

It had to stay here. It had no choice.

The grandmother clock in the upstairs hallway chimed midnight, a soft, homey noise. The house was still, and the kitchen was warm. The thing in the basement—whatever it was—still had not come out. Mrs. Kingsley dared to hope that it would not, that it was holed up in the cellar for good, and would not willingly emerge. Her granddaughter was asleep again, and she was alone with her fear and her guilt.

"He's gone to town to get a snowplow," she had lied. It was moral cowardice, pure and simple, and she knew that she would never be able to completely forgive herself for it. But by the same token, there was no way she could possibly have told the child the truth. Not now. Not in the state she was in. "He'll be back in the morning, after breakfast."

"Oh." Jennifer's head had sunk back to the pillow then. She turned to the side, closed her eyes, and was asleep. A faint green glow from the calculator's display tinged her face.

Alma Kingsley stood motionless. Now that she listened, she could hear the house talking to itself. It creaked and groaned, making wooden noises like doors opening and shutting in a distant, fairy-tale wood. Ghosts walked the halls with slow, ominous tread.

She was afraid. Her heart was beating rapidly, and her limbs felt weak and drained. Her house—her own house!—loomed dark and menacing on all sides, and she was afraid of it.

She needed a weapon. The gizmo Desmond had been working on was nowhere near done, a tangle of wires and trash. Even with the power on, she would have no idea how to finish it herself. Desmond had said the monster was afraid of electricity, but with the power out, all the electronic equipment she owned, the television, the radios, the microwave, the food processor, were dead, and so the idea of surround-

ing them with a barricade of such things, all turned on, wasn't going to work. The electric blanket was useless as a defense now too. There weren't any firearms in the house, and she doubted a kitchen knife would be much use against the creature. Struck by sudden quick inspiration, she stepped into the mud room to the side of the kitchen door and opened the narrow door of the utility closet. There was a heavy wood-chopper's axe there, set on brackets on the wall, behind a jumble of brooms, old vacuum cleaners, saws, rakes, and other junk, where it had rested untouched for years, since her hands had gotten too bad to let her chop her own wood for the winter.

She fumbled the axe down from its brackets, lugged it into the kitchen—marveling ruefully at how *heavy* it now seemed, how much arm-strength she'd lost in only five or six years—and set it down near Jennifer's cot, handle up, leaning against the wall.

It wasn't enough. The axe might make for a secondary, last-ditch line of defense if the thing got into the kitchen, but she was too weak and stiff and arthritic to wield it with any real vigor or competence anymore, and the idea of taking slow, clumsy strokes at a creature that moved as fast as this one did, in a half-darkened room that was dancing with shadows anyway, made her mouth dry with terror. That wasn't good enough. She had to figure out some way to keep it out of the kitchen in the first place.

How to do that? How to keep it out of here, keep it away from Jennifer? Think, damn it, *think!*

The only thing she *knew* it feared was Desmond's pocket calculator.

That was a start, then. She darted into the darkened parlor and snagged a long, white taper from the candelabra on the mantelpiece. With a shiver, she retreated back to the kitchen. She wrapped several paper napkins around its base to protect her hand against the drippings. Desmond would have more calculators among his effects—he was simply that kind of person. There might even be one among Jennifer's things. And for that matter, there was her own, tucked away in the upstairs china cabinet, which she used periodically for taxes and bills.

The candle shed very little light; it seemed to blind her more than illumine the way. She hesitated in the doorway and the shadows flickered and waved about her like living things. She did not want to go into the dark.

Holding herself straight, she stepped forward, fighting against panic.

Desmond had brought along two more calculators, and Jennifer one, a child's calculator in the shape of an owl, the readout part of its big round eyes. Among the child's things, too, she had found a pocket computer game—Meteor Defense, or some such nonsense—and estimating it similar enough to be of use, that brought the total up to six. Five, if you *didn't* count it.

It had been a harrowing expedition. She had started at every creak of the joists or scream of stairway tread underfoot. She had felt the Dark Angel upon her twice, as the shadow in an empty doorway had shifted toward her, and when the darkness behind a cabinet gathered itself up to leap. As she returned downstairs and into the parlor, her pace quickened. The kitchen beckoned.

It so heartened her to reach safe haven that she began to hum a snatch of Mozart. She was alive! She blew out the candle and dumped the calculators onto the kitchen table. For the moment, she didn't even notice the thing crouching in the hallway.

A sudden sense of foreboding, a prickling, crawling sensation, made her spin about. Something moved just outside the kitchen door. Black crawled within black, shadow in shadow.

It yearned forward slightly, then retreated, bobbing up and down in indecision, torn between flight and attack. Mrs. Kingsley couldn't even see it clearly, but she *felt* it studying the sleeping child.

More from panic than courage, then, she ran at the thing wildly. She slashed her arm as if the calculator in it were an axe, and she could use it to chop the thing into bloody bits, its black ichor steaming onto the floor, eating through the carpet.

It hesitated fractionally, then flowed into darkness and was gone.

Mrs. Kingsley sobbed in the doorway, weak and despairing. It was a victory, but a minor one. The thing was still loose, and with every encounter it was losing fear.

She set calculators by the doors to the pantry, hallway, and parlor. The fourth she put by the window, and the little computer game was laid at the foot of Jennifer's cot as a second line of defense. They all glowed gently.

The oil lamp was running low. Mrs. Kingsley blew it out, to conserve what little fuel remained, and twisted on two of the range burners. She felt oddly secure, surrounded by the arcane little devices, with their crisp little lights. She felt safe, protected. It was probably unwarranted, mere blind faith in technology, but …

The calculator by the parlor door began blinking. The numbers had disappeared and there was a single dot tracking its way across the readout. She remembered Desmond bragging about the thing, when he first showed it to her, explaining that if it weren't used for some number of minutes—five? twenty? ten?—the numbers disappeared from the readout, though the memory still held them, and it went into an energy-conserving mode. And then, if more time went by and nobody used it, it simply turned itself off.

Hastily, she punched some figures at random, and hit a function button. The numbers came back on, with that funny little symbol that meant that an error had been made. She ignored it.

It wasn't long before she realized that the calculators were not going to do. Three of them kept blinking off, and one of the others was failing, its batteries low. She couldn't keep punching the things through the night—sleep would take her long before the snowplow came.

Think! she told herself fiercely. She had to kill the thing, to electrocute it somehow … She remembered a story Stephanie used to tell, about the summer camp she'd stayed at as a child, a place with an old-fashioned crank phone system.

The girls used to hook up a phone with one wire connected to a metal bed frame, then the other to a wad of aluminum foil. When the victim sat down on the bed frame, one girl would toss her the ball of foil and yell "Catch!" while her accomplice gave the phone a vicious crank.

She didn't have a crank phone, of course, but she sensed she was on the right track. She'd found a trap that wouldn't require much mechanical skill to set up. All she needed was a power source. Something like …

Something like an automobile battery.

She dressed hurriedly, making plans all the while.

First she got the jumper cables out of the Eldorado's trunk, leaving it up and open behind her as she hurried them through the snow to the

kitchen. Jennifer was still asleep, and this time Mrs. Kingsley didn't try to keep from stroking her hair. The simple act seemed to fill her with resolve. The creature would not get the child. This she swore.

Again she stepped out into the storm. The car's front door balked at first, frozen with the cold. She yanked harder and it popped open.

Candy stared up at her accusingly. The dead girl's face was grotesquely shrunken in upon itself, and the tightening skin had pulled the eyes wide open. Mrs. Kingsley gasped involuntarily. She had forgotten the macabre thing was there, stretched out across the front seat.

But there was no time for squeamishness. She leaned over the corpse, and fumbled under the steering wheel for the hood release. With a *bing* the hood unlatched and she went around front—slamming the door shut behind her—to raise it up and confront the battery.

She was fiddling with the cables—they were cold, of course, and frozen to the terminals, and corroded over as well—when her hands seized up with arthritis again. Vainly she tried to *force* her mittened hands to close about a cable. Pain shot up her arms, but still her hands did not respond. Frustrated, she slammed them against the cables again and again.

The lines wouldn't budge.

Tears built at the corners of her eyes, but sternly she suppressed them, blinking them down, thinking harsh thoughts at herself. There had to be a way—the trunk! She'd left it open, hadn't she? She hurried around back and it was true, the trunk still gaped wide. She rummaged about with her useless arms, pushing things to one side or another as if they were long sticks she was using to poke with, and at last she found what she was looking for. A tire iron.

It took longer to scoop up the iron than she'd have liked, an awkward, nightmarishly clumsy time, but finally she had it, and scuttled back to the battery. Holding the iron like a Punchinello might hold its bashing-stick, she tried again and again, leaning, putting her weight *just so,* until finally the one cable popped loose and went banging against the engine.

Time was all. Mrs. Kingsley tried hard not to think of Jennifer lying alone in the house, at the center of her protective pentagram of failing calculators, tried hard to put blind, unreasoning faith in the flimsy little Oriental-built machines.

It took a hellishly long time to get the iron in position for the second cable, and then it kept slipping out of the way. But at last she pried

that one free of its terminal too, and with a feeling of triumph, she let the iron fall. She reached for the battery.

It would not budge.

She couldn't get her hands around the damnable thing, couldn't get a hold on it, probably didn't even have the strength to lift it.

She *did* cry then, the tears running down her cheeks and the thin trail of moisture freezing on her skin with a faint crackling sensation. But even then she did not give up. Her mind kept working, as she stared with a positive hatred at the battery. There was nothing in the workings of the car touching it, she noted, and nothing beneath it. There was a space of an inch or so around it on three sides, and it was set on a kind of little metal ledge.

If not for that ledge, the battery would fall to the ground.

She set out to break the little shelf, battering and prying at it with the tire iron. Time and again the iron slipped from her hands and fell. She had to get to her knees in the snow, and reach around under the car to make it fall flat, and then draw it out from under and seduce it into her arms again—she lost a lot of time that way.

By now her knees and her arms, up to her shoulders, were numbed and bruised. The cold seemed to soak through to her bones, and she knew she was running a bad risk of frostbite.

But at last she managed to poke and pry and stab enough that with a sudden ripping noise the battery was gone. It had fallen to the ground.

She still couldn't lift it up from the snow—not for more than a few seconds at a time, anyway. But she could get the thing back to the house by pushing it, if she was willing to crawl.

Slowly, with distaste, she got down to the ground. Sometimes a woman had to crawl.

It was more with disbelief than with joy that she finally shoved the battery onto the linoleum of the kitchen floor. Leaving it on its side, she slowly stood and sank gratefully into a chair. Her knees were afire. The creature could have come and taken her then, and she'd have felt only gratitude. It would be so very pleasant to simply lean back and fall asleep …

Something creaked. Panicked, she struggled upright, twisting around to see that Jennifer was still all right. Her father's calculator had slipped to the floor as the child shifted in her sleep. Of the guardian calculators at the doors, only one was still blinking.

Hurriedly she punched new life into the calculators, bringing the green alphanumerics swimming up to their surfaces. There could be no sleep for her. She still had work to do, a trap to set.

But desire would not unclench her hands. She thrust them into her armpits, desperately trying to warm the joints into movement. It didn't work. She was stopped before she could begin.

Finally she knelt by her granddaughter's cot and nudged her ever so gently. "Rise and shine, sweetheart," she murmured. "Grandmother needs you to be her hands."

Jennifer was sleepy and balky. It took a great deal of coaxing just to get her to untangle the jumper cables. Then, when they were stretched out to their ten-foot lengths, side by side like orange vinyl snakes, it was time to assemble the trap.

Fortunately the cables were old, and the clips were not as taut as they might be. Even at that, Jennifer had to use both hands and all her strength to open the grippers enough to clamp them onto a battery terminal. The first two times she tried, they slipped right back off. Mrs. Kingsley merely tightened her lips and said, "Again."

"Why?"

A noise came from the parlor, a faint, whispery slithering sound. Mrs. Kingsley threw back her head, listening, but it was gone. "Just *do* it. I'm your grandmother." She put all the authority she had in her voice, and for a wonder the child obeyed.

As soon as the connection was firm, and wouldn't come loose at a tug on the cable, she threw a tea towel over the terminal, to protect her grandchild against accidental shock. "That's good," she said. "Now the other one."

"This is dumb!" Jennifer cried rebelliously. "I don't have to if I don't want to!"

"By God, I'll give you don't-have-to!" Mrs. Kingsley angrily lifted a hand shoulder-high to slap the child. Then, at the look in her eyes, she stopped, and bit back her anger. She crouched down, joints hurting horribly, and hugged Jennifer to her. "I know it seems hard, child. But sometimes we have to do things we would rather not. It's simply the way the world wags."

Jennifer obstinately shook her head.

"It won't take long, I promise. Suppose that as soon as we get through with this, we make hot chocolate? Would you like that?" She held the child at arm's length, studied her solemnly. "Yes, I'd supposed you would."

The second cable went on smoothly, and Jennifer enjoyed making the ball of aluminum foil. Alma Kingsley had to stop her from using up all that was on the roll.

"Now pretend that the cable is an alligator, and make it bite the shiny ball." It took Jennifer three tries, and then she got it right. The final step was to hook the other cable to something large and metallic, something that the creature would have to touch or pass over to get at her. This was less satisfactory than the rest. The nearest bed frame was on the second floor. She could no more have dragged it down into the kitchen than she could have hauled the battery up the stairs to it. In the end, the best she could find was a screen window that had been stored in the pantry against spring.

The screen was wire mesh, not the modern plastic stuff, but after Jennifer had clipped the cable to it, it looked woefully small and inadequate. There was no way of placing it that guaranteed the creature would pass over it, or of being sure it would be touching when she threw the second cable. But it would have to do. Because it was the best she could come up with.

"Gamma, we can make hot chocolate now, right?"

She allowed herself a smile. "No, my young apprentice. *You* will make the cocoa. Your grandmother will supervise. Have you ever made cocoa all by yourself before?"

Jennifer shook her head, eyes wide and solemn.

"Well! This will be a special occasion, then. The first thing to do is to—"

The cocoa was a smashing success. By the time it was made, Jennifer was nodding and yawning again. She only managed to drink half her mug's contents before her head slumped over onto her shoulder. Mrs. Kingsley led her back to the cot, and pulled the blankets up over her.

The trap was not good enough. It needed … something more. Mrs. Kingsley thought the problem through as she put the cocoa-stained

saucepan in the sink and ran a little water in it for it to soak. The drain was closed and water built up in the sink.

Inspiration struck her then.

She turned the tap all the way over, and stood back to watch the sink fill up and brim over. Water crept out onto the formica countertop, and slopped over onto the floor in a thin, ragged sheet. It splattered and spread, a widening puddle on the linoleum. Soon everything on the floor—including the screen window—was damp.

Success! She stepped through the spreading water and gathered up the calculators. Climbing up on a chair, she sat down on the kitchen table itself, resting her feet on the chair's cane seat. She didn't know much about electricity, but she knew that this would insulate her from the shock. In the same way, the cot's wooden legs would protect Jennifer.

The water was spreading into the pantry and the hallway, seeping through the floorboards, being sopped up by the Oriental carpets in the parlor. The damage it was doing to her house was incalculable. But she kept the water flowing. As long as the one cable was solidly grounded in the water, the entire kitchen was a death-trap for the creature.

One by one, she turned off the calculators, stacking them beside her. She rested the ball of foil in her lap, ready to throw. Let the monster come! She was prepared for it.

She only wished she had thought to brew some tea for the wait.

Time passed with excruciating slowness. She kept squinting at her watch, thinking that an hour had gone by, to find that it had only been a minute or two instead.

Where *was* it? she thought, straining to hear, although she knew that it could move almost without sound. What was it up to? What was it doing?

What was it doing *here,* for that matter? Here in this house, here on this *planet?* For it was obvious to her by now that the creature was not of this Earth. What did it *want?* Why had it come? Was it just a blindly ravening, mindless creature, a simple predator, or did it have some kind of plan, some sort of purpose?

Conquest, probably. Invasion. That was the most likely guess. Perhaps it was a scout for some sort of interstellar invasion force. A spy, a saboteur, a guerilla fighter, a stealthy terrorist. A soldier.

The thought made her feel very tired. Even out among the stars, it seemed, they had soldiers, and wars, and armies, and waged campaigns of conquest. The fighting never stopped, the killing never stopped, no matter where in the universe you went. There was no escaping it.

She blinked back sudden tears, and steeled herself to increased alertness. This time she was drawing her own line in the sand. It was *not* going to get Jennifer. This time she was going to fight the blank black grinding forces of the universe to a standstill. She was going to kill the loathsome thing, right here and now.

Come on, you abomination. Come for me.

Come *on* ...

The weapons were gone! The sophonts had disarmed themselves, rendered themselves unprotected, unguarded ... helpless. And yet such an action was contrary to everything it knew about the nature of sophonts. It felt the contradiction as an almost physical assault.

It was baffled and terrified. The imperatives of survival demanded that it attack and kill the two remaining sophonts. Yet they were alerted and prepared, waiting for it in a space that had but one approach, and *whatever* they had done with their weapons, it was not fooled into thinking they were not dangerous. They were waiting for it.

It quivered in darkness, mantle involuntarily expanding and contracting with conflicting urges, making little retreating and advancing movements, paralyzed with indecision and fear. It was in an impossible position. It felt the wrongness, though it had no way of understanding it. It should not be here, it knew, should not be playing this dangerous game in such alien surroundings. This was not how it was meant to be ...

Finally, though, it came to the only decision it could: it must attack.

If it was to act, it would have to act fast. The sophonts would not remain passive forever. In what pitiable remnants of its mapping functions remained accessible, it created a model of the house, a one-to-one visualization of its every wall and surface, from the patterned tin ceiling of the master bedroom to the uneven dirt floor of the basement. There were lacunae within its knowledge of the house, but they did not matter; it knew those portions that it would employ. Within this small maze it set a marker to represent itself.

It plotted its attack by moving the signifier. Silently, craftily, it would flow up one wall to the juncture of wall and ceiling. Attacking from above was instinctive behavior to its own kind, and it knew from experience that the sophonts here rarely looked up; taken together these facts just might give it an edge.

Quickly, then, it would traverse wall and ceiling to the kitchen doorway. The room was charged with tensions. The air sparkled with dying by-products of the gas oven, dazzling its senses, so that it perceived the two surviving sophonts with their complex nervous systems as areas of greater brightness within a general glare. It would be entering the room half blind.

The mental marker looped over the archway, sped midway across the ceiling to a spot directly over the smaller brightness. It came to a dead stop, and then dropped.

Time and again, it ran the marker through its mazy path of attack, never varying, until the instructions were scored into its consciousness. It was huddled in upon itself, fringe crackling and humming faintly with the effort. Had its enemy known, she could have walked up to it now and destroyed it without its being able to put up the least resistance. All its energies directed inward, it was temporarily helpless. But that was necessary if it was to imprint its attack, making it a single complex involuntary motion, a spasm of reflex violence that would either succeed all in an instant, or fail before it could regain full consciousness.

One last time, it held the cursor-self over the lesser sophont. Without pausing, it dropped. Fluidly, it stunned, possibly even killed, its first opponent, then leaped straight at the second, to wrap its hood about it, and discharge the powers that freed the fire-of-life. It was a desperate move, and if any least thing went wrong, it would be a fatal one.

When the cursor had run through the final repetition, it was as taut with energy as an overwound spring. It positioned itself carefully. It would take only the slightest triggering thought to free that resolve into a blurred burst of killing fury, an explosion of purpose.

Now!

She must have been dozing. Or perhaps a general stunned weariness had dulled her perceptions, so that she stared blankly unseeing as it entered. Because the first that Alma Kingsley saw of the creature was when it flickered down before her, and on top of Jennifer.

It came too fast. It was upon Jennifer before she could react. There was a sudden moving darkness, like black cloth flapping in the breeze, and then a scorching smell, and the child *screamed!* Then the thing was flying through the air at her, the sides of its mantle spread like manta ray wings, as if it needed that little extra bit of lift to reach her.

She would have died then, had her reflexes not betrayed her. For in the panicked instant when the creature fell through the air before her, all thought stopped, all plans of action and attack abruptly fled and she'd scrambled to her feet, chair falling away, as she twisted to flee from the thing.

Then the creature was soaring through the air at the space where she had been, and it slammed into her upraised hand, the one that held the jumper cable with its foolish ball of aluminum foil, as though it were a scepter. The thing's surface had the oddest feel, coarsely textured like it was made of woven metal and at the same time oddly slick, as if it held some faint charge repulsing her hand. The mantle spread wide, then folded in, seeking to wrap her head in its folds. In blind fear, because she had a dread of suffocation that dated back to her childhood, she flung the creature away.

The thing flew across the kitchen, hit the wall, and fell to the floor. For an instant it crumpled to practically nothing. Then unseen forces stiffened it and it rose up, swaying slowly and woozily back and forth, looking for all the world like a punch-drunk fighter. For a long moment they stared at each other.

The thing was resting on the high end of the kitchen, and though the floor was damp there, it was not so deeply puddled as further in, and Mrs. Kingsley didn't know enough about electrical conductivity to know if it was damp enough. "Come on," she grated, holding up the ball of foil as if it were a crucifix she were employing to ward off a vampire. "Just a little bit closer, and I have you."

She thought of righting the chair and climbing up on it, to protect herself. But she was still wearing her rubber boots, having foreseen the danger and put them on for this very purpose, and surely they ought to be enough. "That's right," she crooned. "Slide forward, into the water."

The creature swayed slightly, back and forth, forth and back, clearly focusing on her. It seemed dazed, unsure. It moved a bit to one side, then to the other, avoiding the edge of the puddle proper.

It *knew!* The vile thing knew to avoid the water! She felt a wave of dread. It was not going to be tricked.

To one side, Jennifer made a soft noise, a gentle, final sigh, and Mrs. Kingsley turned to see the child's head fall to one side. The face was burned and blistered, and the eyes closed. She could see no sign of breathing.

The creature chose that instant to attack. It was upon her before she could throw the cable. Alma Kingsley screamed, and it seemed to some far, remote part of her that there was less terror than rage in her scream, and then she was grappling with the thing. It had leaped through the air, and though she held the cable against its skin, no part of it made contact with the water. The circuit wasn't complete.

Those soft, tough surfaces wrapped about her arms, tried to envelop her head. It covered one eye, and she could not pry it off. Her skin tingled, and she heard the faintest imaginable mechanical-sounding hum, as of a generator starting up just over the horizon.

Very deliberately then, Alma Kingsley decided that if she was not going to survive this encounter, then neither would her enemy. It was the only chance Jennifer had. And at the very worst, at the very least, if her granddaughter was already dead, she could take this hellspawned demon with her, and if vengeance was a sour drink, it was at least a potent one.

Grappling the creature with both hands, she threw herself forward, tumbling them both into the wet, charged floor.

Fire! fear! pain! horror! And then a blinding, ripping, sundering bolt of light, beyond pain and horror, more powerful than anything it had ever known, that ripped the very fabric of the universe apart. That wiped its mind clean like a sponge across a blackboard. And then put it back together again, in an instant.

It screamed. Alma Kingsley, lying stunned and spasmed on the linoleum floor, heard it, not with her ears, but deep in her brain, a wash of noise that filled the universe. The creature screamed not as an animal would, not as a being of flesh and blood, backbone and viscera would, but like a machine in agony. Like the scream of stripping gears of some immense but deadlocked engine tearing itself apart with its own energy of motion because it was unable to go forward as it was designed to do, because the load it was pushing against or trying to lift was too great for it to move. Like the high-pitched squeal of distortion, chasing

itself up the frequencies, of an electric amplifier just before it burns itself out with a bang and a flash and the stink of burning insulation. Like the boiler of some old-fashioned steam locomotive shrieking out news of its impending death, seconds before the boiler explodes and fills the icy night with twisted scraps of flying black iron. Like that same locomotive plunging off a high trestle into a deep ravine. Like the dopplering scream of an artillery shell or a missile as it falls out of the sky to kill some mother's child. Like the apotheosis of every ugly mechanical sound that had ever been heard since people came down from the trees and learned how to make tools.

It screamed and there was more to that scream than mere pain: there was anguish there too, maybe even—but she was surely making this up—regret. It was a cry from Hell, like that a damned soul might make as it fell down into the Pit, a cry from a soul that knew that it deserved to be damned, and to fall endlessly forever through darkness.

The car battery shorted out. A scorched smell rose from its remains, and a short black puff of smoke curled like a question mark in the air, slowly dissipating. Freed from her grip, the creature flopped, twisted, and streaked for the kitchen window. There was a flare of energy, and the ugly stench of burning wood, paint, and glass. A pane flowed and melted, and with a dwindling wail the creature was gone, out into the night.

Cold air blew in through the hole.

Alma Kingsley was still alive, although at first she didn't realize it. She lay there for a long time, listening to someone crying, making baffled little sobbing sounds, *hunnn, hunnn, hunnn,* like a beaten and exhausted animal, and then the cold wind in her face revived her enough that she realized that it was she herself who was making the noise, and that that meant that somehow, impossibly, she was still alive. Sense began to seep back into her head, and the world swam blurrily into focus. She moved, instinctively trying to sit up, and a fierce lance of pain cleared her head a little bit more. She had no conscious memory of the electric shock but it must have been bad, because when she tried to remember, her mind shrank away from the very thought in fear and revulsion.

Snow was blowing in through the window from the wind-drifted dune beyond, fine particles that danced a stately gavotte in the middle of the air. She sat there for a moment longer, sitting in a puddle of

water on the floor, cold wet linoleum underneath her, cold air in her face, blinking in bewilderment, staring at the fine particles of snow dancing in the air, staring at the ragged hole melted through the window, wondering what on Earth could have happened … and then memory began to return, and with it, fear and horror, rebooting suddenly, kicking in with a sudden shock that flooded her system with adrenaline, as painful and nauseating as a punch in the stomach.

Jennifer. Oh God, Jennifer!

Somehow, she managed to pull herself to her feet, although the world tilted slowly around her when she did so, first one way and then the other, with ponderous slow-motion grace, as if she were riding a ship in a heavy sea. She staggered toward her granddaughter, falling next to her rather than kneeling, pawing at her with hands that felt like frozen slabs of meat rather than living flesh.

Jennifer was lying still, very still. There was a deep burn across one side of her face, curling up a corner of her mouth, touching the edge of one eye, blistered and cauterized, and all around it the child's flesh was a horrible grey dead-flesh color, as if all the energy and life had been sucked out of her.

She fumbled at Jennifer's throat, trying to find a pulse, unable to tell whether she couldn't find one for the obvious reason or because of her numbed, tingling hands; she could hardly tell whether she was even touching the child without looking to see where her hands were. She leaned close to smell her lips, feeling for even the gentlest whisper of breath from those tiny nostrils, thinking she felt it, unable to be sure.

Without even knowing she'd gotten up or crossed the room, she was at the telephone, fumbling at it, finally getting her hands to pick up the receiver, forgetting entirely that the device was dead—and then, just as she was remembering with a sick surge of dismay that it was dead, she realized it *wasn't.* The dial tone was clear, perfectly normal, as though nothing had ever happened, as though it were a perfectly ordinary day and this a perfectly ordinary call. Somehow she forced her blundering fingers to dial 911. She reached the police with her first attempt and, a flicker of common sense telling her not to babble of monsters, not now, not yet, managed to at least convey that an ambulance was needed out here, that it was a life-or-death emergency, with every second counting … although she knew, without them needing to mention it—although they did—that with all the best will in the world it would take

some time for an emergency vehicle to force its way through the snow-choked roads to her place.

She stumbled back to the cot, knelt down by her silent, unmoving grandchild. Bits and pieces of first-aid wisdom, learned decades ago at summer camp or half-remembered from television programs she hadn't really been paying much attention to, babbled desperately in her head, and so she tugged the blanket out from under Jennifer's frail, broken little body, wrapping her up in it to keep her warm and keep her from slipping into shock, balled the pillows up and stuffed them under her feet to elevate her legs … all the while trying to ignore a cold dry voice in the back of her head, remorselessly logical, that knew perfectly well that all this was useless, and kept whispering, *Too late, too late.* When she could no longer feel any hint of breath, and could no longer feel even the ghost of a pulse—sensation was returning to her hands with a feeling like a thousand hot needles being plunged into them, although she hardly noticed the pain—she began clumsily performing CPR on the child, performing it as well as she could remember how to perform it, anyway, whispering between breaths, "Don't die, don't die, don't die, don't die," like a mantra, trying not to also think *Too late, too late, too late,* like a counter-beat.

At last, she could fool herself no longer, and slowed to a stop. The child looked like a waxwork dummy of herself, all heat and life—the soul, if you believed in those—gone. Her flesh was already growing cold. *Too late.*

Alma Kingsley went away from her body for awhile then. When she came back to it again, returning as though from across a great gulf of space, she heard her voice speaking aloud again, mumbling broken fragments of sentences in a sodden monotone, randomly assembled words that jarred and ground against each other like stones in a sack.

A vast surge of bitterness shot through her. Useless old woman. Never good for anything in your whole damn life. Couldn't keep your husband alive, couldn't save your daughter. Couldn't even protect your own grandchild. You'd think if you'd be able to do *anything,* one miserable thing that made a difference in this foul and pestilent existence, that made it worthwhile that you were ever alive in the first place, at least you could save your own granddaughter. A six-year-old child! Why was it that she was dead and *you* were still alive, living on and on into a bleak morning that had no reason left in it for you to be alive anymore,

and your traitor lungs continuing to pump, your heart to beat, after Jennifer was dead? After everyone you ever cared about was gone? What was the point? Why couldn't she have been allowed to trade her life for the child's? You old fool, couldn't you have done *one thing* right in your life? In your whole useless and pointless life?

It was bitter and hard for her, almost harder and more cruelly bitter than she could bear, to realize that if Desmond had lived and *she* had been the one to die instead, that Desmond—much as she'd always disliked him, thought him not worthy of her daughter, looked down on him, much as she *still* disliked him now, in spite of the fact that he was dead—probably would have been able to save Jennifer from the monster. To save her as *she* had not been able to. Why hadn't it worked out that way? Why had the fates instead left the child's life in her hands? Her useless, good-for-nothing, crippled hands, that had let that life slip through arthritic fingers?

A draft of cold air. She looked up in time to see the back door swing soundlessly open, letting in a puff and swirl of snow.

A sinister, black, serpentine shape reared up in the doorway, raising the bulk of its length off the ground, like a cobra coiling to strike.

It was back.

The creature was back.

Fear was her first, instinctive reaction, an icy stab of atavistic terror that made her back away a step or two, and which dimly surprised her, since she would have sworn a moment before that she no longer cared at all if she lived or died. Well, in fact, why struggle anymore? Let it kill her. What did it matter *now?* She felt resignation begin to glaze over her like a scum of ice forming over a pond, dulling her fear.

The creature swayed in the doorway. Dawn was beginning to break, the sun not yet over the horizon, but staining the sky a sullen purple-red. The creature was a black silhouette against that sullen red sky, weaving slightly from side to side, rippling sinuously. As yet, it had made no attempt to move forward into the house, to attack her, although she knew how fast it could move. Maybe it was scenting the wind, searching out her presence with whatever strange senses it possessed …

Still it didn't move, as one long moment crawled into the next. Maybe it was *taunting* her, teasing her, playing with her the way a cat plays with a mouse. Enjoying her fear. Making her wait. Relishing her helplessness.

Suddenly, she was furious. The murderous creature was toying with her! Mocking her! Rage instantly melted the ice of resignation and futility. If she was too late to save Jennifer, she could still do one worthwhile thing before she died. She could take this obscenity *with* her. She could make sure that it slaughtered no one else's children.

She could make it *pay*. Or at least die trying.

The axe was still resting against the wall, where she had put it what seemed like years ago now, handle up, a few feet away from the cot; she could just see it at the edge of her peripheral vision. Without turning, she took a slow, slow sideways step toward it, not looking away from the creature, not turning her head, not daring to do anything that might break the spell of immobility. She took another slow sideways step, and another, inching along like a crab. Slowly, still without turning her head, she stretched her hand back behind her, trying to move her body as little as possible, groping for the axe-handle.

As she touched it, her hand wrapping itself solidly around the wooden handle, the creature spoke to her.

Kill me, it said.

It struggled against the fire! fear! pain! horror! that welled up through its being. But the torrent of voltage, wild and undirected and irresistible, drove its consciousness helplessly before the flood, driving it *through* that protective hedge of forces, through the whitening, searing agony of the unbearable, into memories far worse.

It was falling. Tightly wrapped within a neatly-calculated bundle of shielding, its consciousness a pure nub at the center of calming forces, it descended from space, down to the Earth below, at last at the end of a journey that had taken many decades, almost half a century, with the real beginning of its Mission yet ahead. But then—impossible!—it felt a blast of radiation, raking through the core of its being, scrambling circuits. The shielding was not good enough! It wasn't holding! It knew about the Van Allen radiation belt, of course, and that had been taken into account when the voyage was planned; beings with greater science than even its own race could command had confidently predicted that even if the Van Allen belt were to be energized by a spate of sunspots, the radiation could not possibly be strong enough to get through.

Mistakes happen, though. They were not gods, and neither were any of the other races they knew, however advanced they might be. Sometimes, even with the highest and most subtle of technologies, things go wrong.

The radiation could not get through, and yet it *was* getting through. High-level energies sleeted through the tightly interwoven fabric of its substance, leaving maddening pain in its wake, a hundred, a thousand times more agonizing than anything it had ever known, pain not only physical but mental as well—logical chimeras that its rational functions could not deal with, self-contradicting structures that one by one overloaded its higher functions, driving it down the asymptotal curve toward total extinction.

It was the best qualified of its race for the job ahead, a creature of vast patience, tact, wit, gentleness, diplomatic skill, culture, and erudition—all the commingled powers had agreed on that, just as they agreed that it was the turn of its race to reach out and bring a benighted alien race out of the darkness of provincial ignorance and into Civilization, just as their own race had been so contacted and assimilated into the galactic community thousands of years before. It had been so *proud* of that, of the responsibility it had been given. But now, it was unraveling in madness and pain, and could *feel* its rational mind dissolving, and could do nothing to stop the process. It felt its higher functions failing, and automatic systems taking over.

The ambassador's race was an ancient and intensely civilized one. Lone eons ago, even before contact with the communities of the stars, they had put aside their predatory origins, overridden them with a thousand culturally programmed safeguards. They no more felt the age-old archaic urges than a human felt the need to brachiate.

The urges were still there though, ancestral voices whispering in the blood, at the very bottom of the brain, as they must be in every corporeal creature who has evolved from a lower—or at least a more basic—form of life.

One by one, it lost reason, memory, personality; it knew the horror of losing everything that made it itself, and *knowing* it was losing it, and being unable to stop the process. At last, it would lose even the knowledge that something had been *lost*, except for a vague trickle of unease at the back of its consciousness. It would be reduced to survival

programming, the underlying atavistic ancestral memory whose human equivalent would be the reptilian hindstem.

From the depths of pain, it had a last fleeting moment of clarity in which to mourn its own passing, and then most of its brain went down.

Glowing like Lucifer falling, it tumbled from the sky, down to the Earth below.

The car battery shorted out. There was a puff of acrid black smoke, and then it was free. Instantly, it reacted. Instinct hurled it *away* from there, away from the trap that had almost killed it, though the window, out into the night.

Outside, alone in the darkness and the swirling snow, with the Northern Lights still a vaguely troubling presence on the horizon, an uneasy prickling sensation that it could now control, it came to the full realization of what it had done.

When she got over the initial shock of hearing the creature speak, Alma Kingsley quickly picked up the axe, bringing it awkwardly around in front of her body so that she could get a better, two-handed grip on it, resting it on her shoulder, ready to swing. She backed away two steps, felt her rear foot bump into the wall, and started to edge sideways again, moving away from the wall a bit (even if it did mean moving a step or two *toward* the monster) so that she'd have room to swing the axe overhand at the creature if it rushed her, a woodchopper's stroke. Couldn't let it pin her against the wall …

Kill me, it said again.

She hesitated. She had been figuring out how to do just that, or the best way to try to do it, anyway, deciding that she'd better rush it and try to get a good swing in at it before the big axe grew too heavy for her tired old arms to hold up effectively, do it right *now,* before she lost her nerve … But it kept putting her off her stride by *speaking* to her; she hadn't known that it could talk.

It wasn't "talking" at all, actually—the words seemed to print themselves in her brain somehow, faintly superimposed on reality, like the afterimage of an object you can sometimes see after you close your eyes. But she had no doubt that it was really happening, or that it was the creature who was "speaking" to her.

Go ahead, it said. *Do it now. I won't try to stop you.*

She came forward a couple of steps, and then stopped, hesitating, wary. This was some kind of trick. It was trying to lure her closer so that it could strike at her, maybe counting on being fast enough to be able to dodge any blow of the axe she might get off at it. When she got close enough, it would attack …

It will not be difficult, it said persuasively. *My physical component is really quite fragile. If you strike at the center of my being hard enough, with something sharp or heavy, that will kill me. That tool you have in your hand will do nicely. I perceive that the handle is made of wood; that will insulate you from any shock. You'll be perfectly safe.*

"You weren't so concerned with my safety a few minutes ago," Alma Kingsley said harshly. "When you were trying to kill me!"

I was insane then, it said. *I have been insane for a long time. But I am insane no longer. The shock that you administered to me has re-integrated my functions. I am sane now.*

"How nice for you!" Rage pulsed through her, and she tightened her grip on the axe. "You unspeakable bastard!"

It shivered convulsively, and she jumped back a step, thinking it was about to attack. But it didn't move forward. *I know what I did,* it said. *I am ready to atone.*

"Atone?" She found herself laughing, harsh, cawing, jagged, ugly laughter that tore her throat. "You killed Jennifer! And Desmond! And … and that poor girl!" To her shame, she was in such a state that could not even summon up the woman's name. "You killed my *dog!*" Tears sprang into her eyes and she blinked them fiercely away. She couldn't allow it to distract her, let it put her off her guard. As soon as she did, it would strike.

I know what I did, it repeated. *That's why you have to kill me.* It was saying slightly from side to side now, as if in agitation. *Kill me! Strike now! Get it over with. I won't fight you. I know I deserve to die.*

She tried to say something but the words tangled themselves in her throat and wouldn't come out. Her head felt like it was going to explode, and she was shaking all over. "You're right about that!" she managed to rasp, panting with rage. "You deserve to die a hundred times over!"

It was shaking too, as though stirred by the same inner wind. *I know that,* it said. *I can't live with the guilt and the shame. I was sent here on a mission of peace, to bring you the gifts that would allow you to live as*

civilized creatures, without war, without want and poverty and hatred. Instead, I killed everyone I met! It swayed violently. *There could be no worse failure! No worse betrayal of everything that I believe in! Kill me!*

She raised the axe. Images flashed through her mind: Jennifer, her face gray and blistered and burned … Iago collapsing in a pathetic jumble of furry limbs … the girl, the roadhouse pickup, smiling vapidly although amiably as she dug a fork into her eggs … Desmond waving his hands and talking expansively, self-importantly … She was crying openly now, tears running down her face, breathing in harsh gasps through her mouth, but she didn't lose sight of the monster, in spite of the tears. She squeezed the wood of the axe-handle until her hands ached. Abruptly, fiercely, she rushed forward, swinging the axe as far back as she could, ready to bring it crashing down.

A step or two away, she stopped, hesitating, the axe swung high in the air.

It hadn't moved, although she was in easy attack distance by now.

DO IT! it shrieked.

There was a long frozen moment, as though time itself had stopped. For some reason, she found herself thinking about something she hadn't allowed herself to consciously think about for decades: her husband's coffin, shipped by air back from Da Nang, being lowered into a hole dug into the raw red earth on a blustery wet spring morning, a flag draped over it, while people in uniform stood stiffly next to the grave and saluted and little Stephanie fidgeted impatiently by her side, too young to understand … the incongruously cheerful sound of birds singing somewhere off in the trees (and she was realizing how incongruous it was even at the time, and hating herself for noticing something like that at a time like this, no matter how ironic it was) … her thinking how much Steve would have hated having his coffin wrapped in a flag, how he would have disliked the solemnity of this whole ceremony, the priest droning pious platitudes about somebody he'd never met and how Steve was now going to walk with Jesus in A Better World … looking at her own mother beside her, leaning heavily on Uncle Henry's arm, noticing with a shock how old and frail and tired she looked … The photo that had stood on the mantelpiece in the living room as long as she could remember, her father in a World War II Army uniform, the father she'd never met, a black star on the glass frame, the photo gathering dust for years, never touched, never moved … Her own daughter

Stephanie, laughing and hugging her at the airport gate, kissing her husband and her baby goodbye, telling them that she'd send them all postcards and maybe some souvenirs if she could find a moment to steal from the sales conference, only minutes before her airplane was blown to pieces in midair by a terrorist's bomb … The military jets screaming by outside, mean and black and predatory, on the way to the buildup for the *next* war, that would kill somebody *else's* children …

As though it were reading her mind—and who knew, perhaps it was—it said, *The Mission will succeed, even though I failed. Eventually. They will send someone else. It may take another hundred years for them to get here, but eventually they will, and we'll help you heal this world of yours. I have to believe that. Eventually, my failure won't matter. The Mission will succeed.*

Another hundred years. How many children dead in that time, in how many wars?

She heard the sound of a siren, a thin wail still far away, on the edge of hearing. The ambulance coming.

Kill me, it said. *You have the right. I owe you that. I have nothing to pay with but my life.*

Suddenly, she was very, very tired, unutterably weary, as though the marrow in her bones had turned to lead.

Hurry. They're coming. Soon it will be too late. Kill me now. Don't hesitate. I want you to do it. I don't want to live. I can't live with what I've done. It hurts too much.

A kind of weary revulsion seized her then, a nauseated rejection of everything and everyone. She stared at the alien for another long moment. "Then *live,* God damn you," she cried bitterly. "Live and be damned!"

She flung the axe aside.

Her legs gave out, and she sat down abruptly on the cold floor. If this was a trick, then it had won. She no longer even cared. Let it kill her if it wanted to.

The wailing siren came closer and closer, the sound cutting sharply through the cold winter air.

One year later, on the anniversary of First Contact at Maple Hill Farm (as the scroll on the screen would say whenever they came back from the commercials), Alma Kingsley sat alone before the television set, lis-

tening to herself being praised on CNN. The commentators prattled on and on about the terrible tragedy of the Ambassador's arrival, and of the even greater tragedy that would have occurred had it not been allowed to complete its Mission; one commentator, face radiating sincerity like a pot-bellied stove radiates heat, spoke of Alma Kingsley as a secular saint for forgoing personal revenge for the Sake Of All Mankind.

The Ambassador had tried to attend Jennifer and Desmond's funerals (Candy was buried elsewhere), but she had refused to allow it to attend, to the disappointment of the newsmen, although they were there filming everything in sight anyway, keeping tight closeups on her face as the last remnants of her family were lowered into the ground, not wanting to miss the slightest nuance of expression. Later, at the UN, the Ambassador had insisted on giving an emotional eulogy for the people he had inadvertently killed, going on to say that Alma Kingsley's greatness of spirit, in being willing to forgive even the very creature who had killed her own granddaughter, all by itself was enough to prove that humanity was worthy of inclusion among the great interstellar Community of Races, and would insure their admission.

Sometimes he wondered if the creature, who was certainly many times smarter than she or any other human being, had *manipulated* her psychologically into deciding not to kill it, using a sly variant of Br'er Rabbit's "Don't Throw Me in the Briar Patch!" routine to get her to act the way it wanted her to act. Certainly it had been easier for it to explain itself to the ambulance crew and the police with her there alive on the scene to vouch for it than it would have been if she were dead, and it was there alone to greet them with a houseful of murdered people at its back. And the forgiveness angle made for great press, just the spin to neutralize the unfortunate fact that the Ambassador had started its career on Earth by killing as many humans as possible. Or maybe it *had* been sincere. Certainly its people *did* seem to be highly ethical, concerned with Justice and Right Actions in a fussy, legalistic, rabbinical way that seemed almost prim. She would never know, one way or the other.

CNN was now running through a quick inventory of all that humanity's new friends had given the Earth so far. Once the Ambassador had used the living fabric of its body to form and trigger an interstellar Gate, new technologies had poured through in a seemingly end-

less stream: Defensive weapons that really *were* defensive, for they couldn't be used offensively ... an end to disease ... medicines to expand the human lifespan a hundred years or more ... safe and plentiful energy ... the transmutation of elements ... gold from lead ... lilacs from mud ... silk purses from sows' ears ... a partridge in a pear tree ... blah, blah, blah.

They were like children on Christmas morning, with bright wrappings strewn about and nothing but presents as far as the eye could see. To listen to them go on, it seemed that the entire human race was going straight to Heaven. Everybody was going to be healthy and beautiful and tall. They were all going to be transformed into gods.

Except Jennifer. She didn't get to be immortal and go to the stars. She got to lie at the bottom of a grave in Brattleboro, rotting in the cold unforgiving ground, while worms ate her.

Alma Kingsley sat staring at the screen and listening as voices far older than any god spoke within her. Their words were dark and poisonous. They ate at her heart like acid.

She got up and fixed herself another Manhattan. Bitterly she drank it down, wishing—as she would wish every day for the remaining two hundred years of her life—that she'd killed the thing when she had the chance.

The City of God

by

Michael Swanwick and Gardner Dozois

It was high summer in Orange, in York, in the Human Domain of Earth. There was commerce in the town, crops in the field, beasts in the byre, bandits in the roads, thants and chimeras in the hills, and God in His Heaven—which was fifteen miles away, due east.

From where Hanson worked—on an open platform extending out from the side of the giant State Factory of Orange and nestling right up against the bare, rocky face of Industry Hill—it was possible to look east, out across the teeming squalor of Orange, and see the Wall of the City of God marching north-south across the horizon, *making* the horizon really: a radiant line drawn across the misty blue of distance, pink as a baby's thigh, pink as dawn. And to know that it stretched, in all its celestial arrogance, over two hundred miles to the north, and more than three hundred miles to the south, unbroken, cutting three-quarters of the Human Domain off from the sea—the City of God, perfect and inviolable, with a completeness that was too much for man. That was what Hanson must face every day when he came to work and stood in the sun and in his human sweat with his little shovel. That terrible, alien beauty, indifferent to mortality, forever at his back, a head's turn away, as he worked, as he grew old. And knowing that God and all the gods were in there, pure and incomprehensible as fire, maybe watching him right now, looking down over the Edge of the Wall and into the finite world: a huge watery eye, tall as the sky.

But no one ever thought much about God on shift, not for long. The sun was too hot in summer, the wind too bitter in winter, the work

killing in any season, blighting and shriveling a man, draining him dry. There was too much sickness, not enough food, little medicine, little comfort, and only brief bitter joys. It soon became evident that God didn't care about man, that He paid no more attention to the misery swarming beneath the Wall of His City than man pays to the activities of beetles, that He had no more compassion for humanity's messy agonies than man had for the suffering and tribulations of May flies. There were two State Temples of Purified Catholicism visible in the sweep below, and even the encircled cross that marked a *kachina* shrine, a *kiva,* but none of them were very well attended. In spite of its proximity to the Wall of the City of God—or perhaps because of it—Orange was not a devoutly religious town.

Hanson leaned into his shovel and watched the blade disappear into the coal. The pile sloped up and back, toward the lips of the gullet, through which new lumps of coal would rattle slowly down onto the top of the heap every few seconds, obliging the shift to keep up a steady tempo of work to avoid being swamped. On heavy days they would have to shovel like fiends to keep up, dumping the coal down chutes into hoppers on the lower transport level of the factory. But no matter how much they sweated, the coal remained undiminished, replenished constantly from the top as fast as they could clear it away from the bottom: a glossy black mountain crawling sluggishly with the unending inching motion of the coal. Hanson had even stopped hating it, regarding it now as a condition to be endured, something too big, impersonal, and constant to rail against, impersonal as a thunderstorm. His mother had told him an ancient tale once—a few months before she'd died in one of the food riots that were an aftermath of the Campaign Against The South—about women with brooms trying to sweep the sea free of salt. He often thought about the tale while on shift, and unlimbered the flinty thing that had served him for a smile the past few years, since his wife Becky had died coughing blood in the White Winter four seasons back.

It seemed that everyone he had ever known and loved had died, one by one over the falling years, leaving him here in the barren center of nothing, living on and on, alone. He had never wanted it that way. He'd never asked for that.

Taking a step backwards, Hanson scooped up a shovelful of coal, pivoted smoothly, and tossed it over the curb and into the chute, turn-

ing back for another shovelful without bothering to watch the first fall. After years on the job, he could send a steady stream of coal anywhere he wanted it, with pinpoint accuracy, almost without looking. He placed his foot on the blade, dug it back into the pile, and stopped. Normally he would work like this for hours without stopping, steady as a mechanical thing, his motions flowing into an unbroken cycle. But today—today he could not keep his mind on his job, today he was like a child, distracted by anything, everything, the wind, the sky, the light glinting from his shovel blade. He leaned on the shovel, buried up to the handle in the pile, and watched the gullet spit up some more coal.

Somewhere up there, miles deep into the slope, miles beneath Industry Hill, maybe even halfway to Pitt, one of the last surviving Utopian autominers was burrowing and wallowing like a steel whale through a deep vein of coal, exploring the secret roots of the world. No—it was blind, and ate its way past wonders it could never see, so maybe tapeworm would be a better analogy than whale: a robotic, reactor-powered tapeworm that gnawed through Earth's bowels with adamantine teeth, insatiably tracing the tightening convolutions of the intestines, passing the ore through its indestructible body and voiding it back along the endless tail of the conveyor field to the mouth of the gullet. Where it dribbled onto the pile and tumbled slowly down the grade so that Hanson or one of his shift-mates could scoop it up with a shovel and dump it into a hopper. Hanson had wondered once or twice at the Factory, at Orange, at the State of York—at the incongruity of a society that must use unbelievably sophisticated machines and primitive hand-labor as integral parts of the same industrial process. Horses pulled the loaded ore-hoppers across Orange to the Docks, where a monster Utopian transport waited to carry it on the long journey to the ancient blast furnaces in Pitt, then skirting the Wall to the pockets of industry in the Chesapeake country, and then to the South. Horses and transports, autominers and shovels. The Utopian machines were used where they could be used, to do the magic work no army of ordinary men could do. Where they couldn't be used, where there were no machines any more to be used for *that,* then the gap was filled in with hand-labor, with sweat and broken backs and sudden heart attacks. There were plenty of people after all.

And most of those people found nothing odd in the arrangement. Hanson had once worked with the Utopian autominers, years ago, be-

fore factory politics and the enmity of Oristano the foreman had started him on the long road down to the Pit, and when he had first arrived at the Pit, at the rock bottom of his career with nowhere to go except death, he had remarked to old Relk in a mixture of bitterness and grim humor that it was too bad they couldn't scrape up a Goddamned Utopian machine to do the Goddamn shoveling. Relk had merely gaped blankly at him, unable to understand—Hanson might as well have spoken in a foreign language. Work was work; magic was magic; and that was that. Relk could see no incongruities, no connections between the two. He'd sniffed disapprovingly at Hanson and told him he wouldn't last long in the Pit.

But Hanson had worked like a hill demon his first few months in the Pit, and had finally replaced the old shift-leader, Ricciardi, after Ricciardi had died of a heart attack on the job. But that didn't cut any ice with Relk, "that didn't make no never mind" with him, as he would have said. No one lasted in the Pit as long as Relk, in the end. Others were transient; Relk was a permanent fixture.

Relk was staring at him now, his leather face wrinkling facilely into deep-worn lines of displeasure, so that he looked like a shriveled, thousand-year-old monkey with a bellyache. Hanson realized that he had been hesitating for a couple of minutes, leaning on his shovel and watching the gullet. He cursed himself wearily. As shift-leader, Hanson had the responsibility of pacing the work, setting the tempo and rhythm. He couldn't allow himself the luxury of daydreams—at least he wasn't supposed to. Angrily he scooped up another shovelful of coal, dumped it, came back for another. He forced himself back into the rhythm, concentrating on the movement of his body.

Relk snorted sourly and began shoveling again. Relk had never thought much of Hanson as a shift-leader. Hanson wasn't dedicated enough. Old Relk had worked the Pit for more than thirty-five years—his skin burned black, his skinny, knotted, cordwood body indestructible—and he'd seen at least ten shift-leaders come and go. None of them had been dedicated enough. Relk was dedicated—so dedicated his intelligence had long ago sunk down to the subhuman, which was why he'd never been chosen for shift-leader. He was totally absorbed by his job. He *was* his job, so much so that he no longer had any separate existence or identity. In many ways, then, he was the ideal citizen of Orange. He made Hanson's flesh crawl.

Hanson glanced surreptitiously down the line to see if anyone else had noticed his lapse. Gossard, next down beyond Relk, seemed oblivious to the world, grimly absorbed in his task. He was a little slower in the shoveling than the others—his motions faltered occasionally, the big blade wobbled every so often in his hands. His pale, globular body glistened slickly with sweat. The Pit was hard on Gossard. He was a good man, a friend, and a conscientious worker, but he was absurdly fat—the sickly, flabby fat of a glandular imbalance; few men got enough to eat in Orange to become fat in the traditional manner—and his weight told cruelly on him, especially in the summer. But he was trapped; he wasn't a fast enough worker to merit advancement out of the Pit, and the blacklist would deny him employment elsewhere if he should quit his job. It was hard enough to live on State salary; people without jobs often didn't live at all. If Gossard wanted his family to survive, he had to work here. It would kill him someday. The coal dust bothered him too, and he coughed constantly, great wracking coughs that set his fat to quivering like lard poured into a tub. Hanson wondered sometimes if the dust or a stroke would get Gossard first.

Beyond Gossard were the two workers with unpronounceable names who didn't speak Mercan very well: one burly, bland and butter-colored; the other as dead-black as the coal, amazingly slight for Pit work, all whipcord muscle and jittery nervous energy—the track marks were vivid up and down his arms and legs, and some days his eyes were nothing but whites swimming with ruptured blood vessels, but as long as he did his work, nobody would complain until the day he finally collapsed. They were openly queer, sitting with sweaty arms wrapped around each other's necks during breaks and joking in their rapid, incomprehensible dialect, singing and fondling each other in the washroom, grinning obscenely at the other men. Nobody cared about that either, and some people openly envied them: women had been scarce in Orange for a number of years now. Hanson had privately named them Tic and Tac. Tic was now working with insane speed, but spastically, spilling coal, doing a jittery skipping dance dangerously close to the curb with every stroke, unable to remain still even for a second. Tac was slyly screwing off as usual, his face crafty as a cat's, but Hanson didn't feel like calling him on it so soon after his own dereliction.

He used his return swing for an excuse to glance to his left, where he had been wanting to look from the first, made hesitant by guilt and

apprehension. They had put the New Man there this morning, just to Hanson's left, ostensibly so that Hanson could keep an eye on him. Hanson knew better. Hanson and Oristano the foreman had been deadly enemies for almost a decade and they understood each other with that special intense intimacy reserved for feuders and lovers. And Oristano's obscene shark grin this morning, as he introduced the New Man, had told the whole story. Oristano knew Hanson's pride, knew how it had been slowly battered down over the years until being the fastest, hardest worker in the Pit was the last thing Hanson had left to be proud of, knew how Hanson clung to that brag with the desperation of a drowning man.

And that it was no longer true.

The New Man was working with the dazzling, rock-steady rhythm he had displayed all morning, calm, fluid, and unrestrained, not even breathing hard. He was a huge bull of a man, a coffee-colored giant with kinky, flaming red hair. He was a solid barrel of muscle, carrying not an ounce of fat, and he was *young*. He was very young. Hanson had been a factory legend in his own time, but he was almost twenty years older than the New Man, and each day of those years sat like lead on his arms and legs, like a bar of iron across his shoulders. Hanson knew that he couldn't beat the New Man, not now, not after half a lifetime of killing labor—the New Man was young, magnificently fresh, fed by a hundred biological springs that had dried up in Hanson long ago.

He just couldn't keep up with him. That was bitter; that was very hard.

Maybe he never would have been able to match this monster, even in his prime.

That was unendurable.

The New Man had seen him daydreaming, like a toothless old fool, just when he should have been establishing his status over the younger man, when he should have been proving that he was still the hardest working slug in the Pit. He had shamed himself before the New Man, he had disgraced his reputation at the very moment that he needed it the most. He was too old, his brain was going, he couldn't think anymore. Somebody should shoot him if he was getting that senile, roll him in a ditch, cover him up before he started to rot out in the open air. And the New Man was easily matching Hanson's quickest pace, with

the unthinking grace and sureness of the young. In fact, it was obvious that he could go much faster if he wanted to but that he was restraining himself, he was deliberately holding himself back to Hanson's slower tempo.

The New Man was being *polite*.

And Hanson stopped thinking, except with his body.

Hanson began working faster, without volition—faster and faster, like a mechanical toy speeding up to a blur, wound too tight, out of control.

The New Man matched him easily, stroke for stroke.

Gossard faltered, dropped out. Tic and Tac kept up a little longer and then stopped, panting, watching in awe. Old Relk continued to work at his own personal speed, ignoring everybody, shaking his head at the decadence of the world.

The New Man had finally moved ahead of Hanson, opening up all the way. Hanson couldn't keep up. Already he had fallen three or four strokes behind—

To Hanson, it was as if the sun had melted and poured down over him in a cascade of scalding molten gold—he breathed it stabbingly into his lungs, it stripped the flesh from his bones, it broiled the marrow in the sockets, it piled up mountainously on his shoulders and crushed him with the weight of the sky. Slowly his legs buckled under the mass of the sky-mountain. He was talking to Becky now, and they were walking together through a high open meadow where the grass and trees were made all of ice, and flowers sprinkled like searfrost. But he couldn't keep up with her because the mountain was too heavy and he couldn't put it down. He tried to run after her but the mountain crushed him like a giant's thumb and the icy ground softened to mud under his feet, and he sank into it under the mountain, floundering, sinking deeper and deeper. No matter what he had to stop.

He did.

The shovel saved Hanson from actually falling. He leaned against it, legs rubbery, knees flexed, breath rasping in his throat. Oristano's face swam under his eyelids. It superimposed itself over the coal-mountain, the two things merging into an inhuman, undefeatable entity—a god of black malignancy. He opened his eyes. Slowly, his vision cleared. Planes of bloody shadow resolved into the New Man, who was staring at him with a worried, embarrassed expression. He caught Hanson's

eye and smiled hesitantly—he didn't want to rub Hanson's face in his victory. He was still being very polite.

Gossard caught the tension in the air and went doggedly back to work, not wanting to watch Hanson's final humiliation. Tac made an obscure, fatalistic gesture with his fingertips; Tic stroked his shoulder, pursed wet lips—they started shoveling again. Relk looked around with an air of sly, senile vindication, made a muffled *hunh* sound and turned away, muttering something about dedication to the coal pile as he dug his blade into it.

Hanson drew himself up. His arms and back throbbed as if they had been beaten with clubs and there was no strength in his legs; he wobbled in spite of his best efforts to brace himself. The New Man pretended not to notice. Hanson ran his tongue around his lips, tasted blood, swallowed it. Defeat slumped his spine, burned his brain to ash. He waited for some ashen thought to filter down through his new ash brain, but no thought came—it was as barren as the Moon. Sternly, he took control of his face, and forced himself to smile back at the New Man. It wasn't really his fault; he was a good boy. Blame himself instead. Blame Oristano. Blame Time.

The New Man relaxed, visibly relieved—his smile broadened into a grin from which with all the best will in the world, it was impossible for him to keep a trace of satisfied triumph. This is his hour, Hanson thought, let him enjoy it. He was being good about it anyway, out of respect for Hanson's reputation. How very strange that was. When had living admiration become respect for a legend? How could the line have slipped up on him and passed without his notice? Had he been that blind? Wasn't he still the same man he'd always been, below the old bones?

The New Man fished in his pocket and came up with a narc. He scratched the stick on his hip; the narc flared and then guttered to an orange ember-glow at its tip. A wisp of smoke curled up around his massive forearm like the ghost of a snake. The New Man offered the narc to Hanson: a friendly monster, smiling and huge, sweat runneling his broad face.

Hanson hesitated, studying the sweaty giant, and then took the narc. He put the horn-tipped end of the resin stick in his mouth and sipped deeply, holding a smoldering pine forest in his lungs. The New Man produced another narc. They stood smoking together while the sun baked them dry of sweat. Coal rustled unheeded around their feet.

"Hot sumbitch, a'n't it?" the New Man said.

"Ai," Hanson said, trying not to sound too much like a dead man. Prodding himself: "A'ways is, this time of year. Freeze your ass off in winter though. A'ways one or the other, up here. You a'n't never going to be comfortable."

"Ai."

The New Man was staring out across the sweep of Orange: seas of hunched, dirty roofs, narrow alleys, smoke-belching chimneys, here and there the broken skeleton of a ruined Utopian building towering above the squalor, picked clean, naked and pathetic. "Can see a hell of a ways, though, up here," the New Man said enthusiastically. "Most all of the city I'll bet, near about."

"Ai, the whole Goddamn shitpile." He wouldn't turn his head to look at the Wall, though he was sharply aware of its presence. It beat against him like a hand of light, the knowledge of that golden, heartless thing.

Far as Hanson could tell from here, the Wall marched across the whole world and never came to an end. The Goddamned thing just never ended at all.

He blinked back sudden tears of rage and sorrow so great they squeezed his heart.

"Come on," he said, and punched the giant in the shoulder. And picked up his shovel.

And somehow he managed to keep working throughout the afternoon, although his mind was not there at all most of the time. His body seemed to manage well enough without it.

It was dark by the time the shift ended. Hanson gave the signal to quit work, and they shouldered their tools and shuffled single file along the curb to the lip of the Pit.

Oristano met them at the lip.

To Hanson, the foreman looked like a gross manikin sculpted from shadow, a hunched puddle of darkness that even starlight couldn't melt, merely glinting dully from teeth and eyes. He was backlit by the furnace glare that escaped around the iron doors behind him, and his bloated silhouette suddenly seemed to be that of a monster toad crouched in a smoldering sulfur swamp, waiting for weary flies to spiral hopelessly down within reach. Hanson could almost see the sticky, supple frog-tongue licking out, flickering impatiently down and around the

foreman's waist. Then Oristano stepped forward, and the rough blob of his head split open to reveal an ugly, tooth-glinting grin. Oristano was big, half a head shorter than Hanson, but built broader and heavier. Hanson could remember him as a svelte bear of a man, covered with bristly black hair, clumsy but very powerful, and with a bear's sick, uncertain temper. Time and ease had added weight until now he was grossly fat—not the flabby stuff of Gossard's affliction, but tight-packed and well-muscled lard that made him look even more dangerous than he had in the past. Usually he was brusque with Hanson, and the two spoke little to each other, making no attempt to hide their dislike. Tonight he greeted Hanson with boisterous good cheer and an exaggerated oily courtesy, asking Hanson in a loud voice if the New Man had worked out alright.

"Yes," Hanson answered quietly, "he works very well." The shovel felt incredibly heavy against his bruised shoulder. He bowed grudgingly under its weight. Alternate waves of hot and cold ran along his body, and a faint nausea returned. He could sense the New Man somewhere off to his right, embarrassed again, made uneasy by the sadistic malice in Oristano's voice and the weary, beaten hatred in Hanson's, aware that the two older men were acting out some ritual that he couldn't quite understand but in which he had played an integral part.

"He's a good worker, ai?" Oristano boomed.

"Yes," Hanson said.

Oristano grinned, another flash of crooked teeth. "Good, good." Flash again. "That's *good,* ai?"

Hanson nodded dully.

"Ai." Oristano laughed, and waved a ponderous arm. Factory artisans rolled the fire door open—the sudden blast of hot light sent Oristano's shadow leaping out, swelling and elongating fantastically, washing over Hanson—and began to carry equipment out. Hanson's shift moved up from the curb, swirling around Hanson, and filed along the platform behind the lip to make room. The new shift waited by the fire doors as the artisans gingerly carried old spotlights out to position them along the curb. The line of artisans broke around Oristano: ants around a boulder. Neither man had moved. Oristano bulked like an ogre on the platform, goblin-grin glistening wetly. Hanson remained at the junction of curb and lip, shovel still slung across his shoulders, watching wearily.

The artisans had clamped the spotlights to the curb at intervals, muzzles tilted up at an angle so that their glare wouldn't blind the shovelers, but would give enough light to work the Pit. Now they were stringing much-patched wires back along the underside of the curb, where they'd be out of the way of pivoting feet, and testing connections. The spotlights came on one by one, at low intensity: a herd of giant rheumy orange eyes—dinosaurs jostling down in the dark to drink. The nearest spot spilled shifting orange patterns across Hanson's knotted back, up and along the bulge of Oristano's naked belly. Then the spot came on at full strength, slicing a white column through jet. In the sudden glare, Hanson could see Oristano's face clearly for the first time that evening: heavy-jowled, eyes pinched shut with fat; lips absurdly small and delicate; a mashed, shattered nose laced with old white scars, hair peeking in tufts from the nostrils. The same beam illuminated the upper half of the pile and the ceaseless crawling of the coal.

All this, all these years, Hanson thought in numb horror, because I once broke Oristano's nose in a tavern brawl, in front of the men of the factory.

Nothing ever ended. Five minutes of his past had birthed all the rest of his life.

Hanson shifted the weight of the shovel and stepped up onto the lip. He walked past Oristano without looking at him and continued steadily on across the platform to the fire door. Oristano laughed again, an ugly clotted sound, and followed Hanson with his eyes, although he disdained to turn his head.

Fifteen years of shuffling around the giant factory, going from one section to another, from job to job, always falling lower, but always hanging on to one more hope—fifteen years, and now it was all over. He was finished. The New Man would be shift-leader tomorrow, although he didn't know it yet. Hanson would not come back. Oristano had known that he wouldn't. And without a job in Orange, barred from work by quitting the factory, Hanson was a dead man. He might as well lie down now and wait for the scavengers. It was all over with him.

Without saying a word, Hanson collected his shift and led them out through the fire doors, through the guts of the factory towards the washroom. He did not look back.

Behind him, Oristano smiled.

Hanson washed up slowly, working the tarnished brass pump, watching the hypnotically rhythmical spurts of rusty water fill the basin. His face was expressionless, and he ignored the other men in his shift. Relk, as usual, had merely changed into his civilian clothes and left, without bothering to wash, without bothering to say goodbye. Tic and Tac splashed noisily at the far basin, talking in a rapid stream of gutturals and fricatives. Gossard wallowed in armfuls of water, blowing like a whale. The New Man washed quietly, dressed, and then hesitated by Hanson's basin on the way out, feeling obliged to say something to the older man but afraid to speak. Hanson did not look up. After several moments, the New Man shrugged, shook his head, and left. Hanson continued to wash, stolidly, turning his arms over and over under the pump.

Moving with deliberation, he soaped the salty patches of dried sweat from his body, lifted the heavy ceramic basin, and poured the brackish water over his head, carefully pumped the basin full, and rinsed himself again. While he was doing this, Tic and Tac went out, each staring at him as they went by—Tac looking at him with morbid, insolent curiosity, as if he was examining a particularly interesting corpse, and Tic rolling his eyes in a quick sideways motion, as if he was afraid to look at Hanson directly, as if Hanson was the carrier of a disease so virulent it could be contracted by a glance. Hanson stood like a statue, holding the basin over his head, letting the water flatten his thinning black hair, cascade over his shoulders, pour in runnels down his legs. His eyes were fixed and unblinking. Tic and Tac hurried out, and didn't look back.

When the basin was empty, Hanson put it down and picked up a coarse towel, moving no more than necessary. He heard Gossard come up behind him, hesitating as the New Man had, a few steps away. Hanson rubbed himself down methodically, not turning around. Gossard shifted his weight uneasily from foot to foot, unconsciously sighing and massaging his stomach. Hanson could hear him breathe: labored, wheezing, strangled by fat. He wouldn't last much longer, Hanson thought again. His heart, one day on the shift. Or a stroke. Or the dust. The thought made Hanson sad and almost pierced the wall that humiliation and the loss of status were building around him—he felt a momentary desire to talk to the fat man, to confess the shame and agony. To share his friendship while he's still alive, Hanson realized, in a wave of black fury. Before the job kills him. Like it will kill all of us eventu-

ally, one by one, until only old Relk is left. Or until we all become like him: dead, but still walking. Hanson snapped the towel viciously against his calf, relishing the sting, and began to rub himself down again. Anger had rebuilt the walls of his shame, and he pointedly ignored Gossard, keeping his back turned. Why should one corpse talk to another? About what? Gossard cleared his throat obstreperously without eliciting any response, walked suddenly to the door, paused, and came slowly back.

"Carl?"

"Yes?" Hanson replied, without turning his head.

"Are you all right?"

Hanson's cheeks flamed. Half a lifetime leaped in his throat, tangled itself hopelessly in his tongue, refused to pass his lips. What he said was: "Yes."

"You're certain?"

"Yes."

Silence, Hanson standing motionless with the towel clutched in his hands like a snake, and then Gossard said "Is there—" and Hanson said "No," almost simultaneously.

Gossard tried again: "If there's anything I can do—"

"No."

Then, forcing himself to speak:

"No. Thank you, John, but no. Nothing."

Then:

"There is nothing that can be done."

There was a long silence and Hanson did not move at all. Gossard didn't speak again. After a while, he went away, closing the door gently behind him. The sound of his heavy footsteps dwindled into distance, was gone.

Hanson was alone.

The fading gurgle of water down sunken drains, the slow drip-drip of a faulty pump. The single carbon lamp flared and dimmed regularly with the beat of hidden dynamos, a brassy illumination washing across the stone walls and floor, ebbing from a beach of shadows. The air was heavy with old sweat. The room was full of ghosts.

Hanson was still for a moment longer, then, like a statue coming to life, he crushed the towel into a ball and hurled it viciously away, shuddering with disgust. He took a staggering step to a basin, braced his arms against it, and took three deep breaths, his backbone rising

and falling with the effort. Gradually his breathing slowed. He became a statue again.

He had been sure he was going to be sick, but he couldn't: the sickness clogged somewhere in the very back of his throat, too deep ever to be regurgitated.

He pushed himself away from the basin, walked rapidly and violently to the center of the washroom, and stopped, looking around uncertainly, shaking his head, baffled. He started out again with great vigor, stopped after two steps, casting quick, frightened glances around him, seeing through the walls to the labyrinth of factory corridors, the maze of his life. He grimaced, rubbed his hands along his ribs, forced himself into motion, his steps dragging as if he were wading into quicksand, four steps, five, and he was halted again—stopped dead by inertia. He could feel the factory above him, below him, holding him in its belly, crushing down against his shoulders, anchoring his feet deep in its alien earth.

There was no place to go.

There was nothing to do.

There were no options left open to him.

Appalled, he allowed himself to drift back into the washroom, away from the door, along the row of basins, along the row of urinals. The stone under his feet was stained and porous, slightly damp—it felt like flesh. The air was delicately webbed with ancient piss, the light was spiky and hurtful against Hanson's eyes, his shadow drifted listlessly with him, across the grimy walls—the ghost of a ghost. He fetched up against the far wall, turned restlessly, and pushed into a wooden commode stall. The commode was old—stone-lipped, and earthen-breathed from the huge sump beneath the factory. It was now considered a luxury, and the use of it an incentive to work; the factory had been built in somewhat more prosperous times—the interlude between the Third Plague and the disastrous Campaign Against The South—when the State had been able to afford spending money and materials on such things, and when artisans sufficiently talented to build such a system were common enough to waste on nonessentials. Hanson had been raised with outhouses and nightjars at best, slit trenches or hand-scooped holes at worst, and still found the big stone commode alien and faintly menacing, in spite of years at the factory. He stared at it dumbly, as if expecting it to speak in a septic voice of decay.

Habit took over. Automatically, he sat down, tried to move his bowels. All the while, he watched himself, as if from a vantage point outside his body—one part of his mind was sardonically amused, one part was very afraid, and one part was murderously angry. The fearful part kept him going through the mundane actions of his normal life by rote, making him wash, dry himself, excrete—all rather desperately, as if by clinging to familiar routine he could negate and unmake the horrors of the day. The sardonic part was amused by the incongruity of trying to cling to normalcy when his life had just been blighted, destroyed, turned upside down, of carrying out the minutiae of life when he was dead. The angry part watched both others, and despised them both, and grew ever more angry at the conditions that had produced them—it knew nothing but hate.

There was an open, latticed window in the wall, giving a fine overview of the torchlit sprawl of nighttime Orange, but Hanson refused to look at it. He watched the wide lip of the window instead, the iron bars set in stone, the intricate networks of cracks and chips, the patterns of dirt and small pebbles, the mummified bodies of flies—watched them until they had no meaning to him anymore, until they were completely alien to him, incomprehensible, and then he watched nothing at all, just as intently although his eyes were no longer focused. The stone underneath his buttocks was cold, and the night wind through the window was damp on his naked body. Instinctively, he brought his knees closer to his chin, wrapped his arms around his legs. He sat alone and naked in the cold belly of the factory, surrounded by yards of chill stone and the even colder ruins of his life, rocking back and forth, hugging his knees. This was the time to cry—he knew it, wanted to, longed for the release crying would bring. But the tears would not come. They hung, burning, somewhere behind his eyes, but they would not fall. Tears were for the living, not the dead.

And he could not move his bowels, although his stomach ached. He was completely dead now, dry, sterile, shriveled, his blood curdled in his veins, his seed killed in the sack, his bodily openings sewed tightly shut. He moved a hand through the thick tangle of hair on his chest—his skin was slick and cold as rock and he was unable to feel his heartbeat—across his ribs, along his huge arms, his massive, corded legs. There was a roll of fat beginning at his waist, in spite of work, in spite of his poor diet. The muscles were beginning to sag slightly on the under-

sides of his arms and thighs, and veins stood out on his legs as if they were done in relief. He was losing his hair and his skin was starting to crack and yellow, like sun-baked mud. He was getting old. And there was a dull pain in his stomach, always present, although sometimes it would stir sluggishly, like a blunt-headed beast inside him that wanted to get out. The Crab was in there—he had suspected it for months, known it for weeks, finally admitted it to himself. He had seen the Crab take his uncle, his cousin, his brother's wife, his friend Matthew, and now it was going to take him. It would take him within the year.

And what had his life been *for?*

Hanson stopped rocking. He sat very still, listening to the world wind down, listening to his body decay. Now it was as if his mind was a blinking light, first flashing red, then black. When it flashed black he would huddle freezing and paralyzed, immobilized by despair and futility, unable to move, unable to think. When it flashed red, he regained the ability to move, but only in one direction; to think, but only one thought—his frozen limbs thawed in the furnace of rage, but the furnace had been stoked for only one purpose. The light of his mind flashed black and red, red and black, and each time the red light remained on a little longer than the black, and longer, and longer still, like a spun coin wobbling toward collapse, until finally the black light vanished completely and the red light blazed as steady and smoky as blood.

Hanson got to his feet, pushed out of the commode stall—the wooden door boomed with hollow finality in the silence, in the empty room.

Moving quickly and surely, he dressed, laced on his boots, and left the washroom. There was no hesitation in him now: he was all economy and efficiency, his actions flowing together as smoothly as quicksilver as he threaded the factory corridors. He walked with a steady, springy stride, full of authority and self-assurance, cruising through the building like a big, dark clipper ship under full sail. There were few people about at this time of night, and none of those that he encountered thought to question him, or even paid any attention to him at all—he too obviously knew where he was going and why. His expression was calm and absorbed; only a close look would have revealed the strain in that face, the tiny lines around the eyes, the bloodless tension of his lips.

He crossed half the width of the giant building to a little used stairway, ascended two levels, went out a storeroom window, across a low

roof, up a metal ladder in the inky darkness, in another window—squeezing awkwardly between the two boards that haphazardly sealed it—up one more level by another dusty back stairway, along a deserted corridor, and so arrived back at the shift room unseen. He knew the rounds of all the watchmen and State Inspectors perfectly, by the second and by the inch, and he had dodged three of them by this roundabout route, passing successfully through their territories just before or just after they did: the watchmen would swear that no one could have passed them unobserved, and that might help to cloud matters a little, or so the rational layer of his mind hoped, although he was too far gone now to worry much about consequences—he had acted mostly out of an animal instinct that had told him not to let himself be seen, to avoid other men because he was, in this moment, alien to them.

The shift room was empty, echoing and too bright under the carbon lamps. The big metal lockers looked like rows of drab tombstones, light winking coldly and malevolently from their polished faces. Hanson crossed the room unhurriedly and used one of his keys to open a locker. He took out a shovel, carefully doctored the supply sheet to make it appear that the shovel had been issued to one of the men now on shift, and closed the locker up again. Then he walked to a door half-hidden by the row of lockers, opened it with another key, stepped briskly inside, and locked it behind him.

This was a big supply room, seldom in use: dark, smothering, full of the slumbering, shrouded shapes of crates and barrels, steeped through with pungent, unidentifiable stinks. The only light came from far on the other side of the room, very dim and pale, as if it was leaking in from another world.

Hanson made his way slowly through this dusty tangle, oozing around the nearly invisible crates with preternatural ease, making no sound. In the darkness, he appeared less human, more feral: thicker and broader, bulkier, goblinshaped and glittereyed, too sure and catfooted for a man. He held the heavy, iron-bladed shovel like a twig, like a fey child with a switch.

A rectangle of smoky light: a door.

Hanson settled down to wait, squatting on his hams behind a tall packing crate. He knew Oristano's schedule as well as he knew every other detail of factory routine, knew it in both the overt and covert details, as the foreman was a creature of long-established habit in all

things. The second night crew had gone on shift about a half hour before; in an hour Oristano would go on an inspection tour of those sections under his authority, poking and prying and making the workers uncomfortable, as he was hired to do. In the meanwhile, he would be in there fucking fat Emily, the tumorous whore from the Bog, on the cot in his office. In about a half hour, Oristano would finish fucking fat Emily, they would share the obligatory cigarette, and he would let her out the other door—she had another regular appointment on the hour, with Oristano's immediate superior. Then Oristano would cook a C and M speedball—crystal cocaine and morphine—over a small brazier, bang himself with it, and settle down to wait for the rush, and to drink enough corn whisky to ensure that he was in a sufficiently evil mood for his tour. After the whore left, he would be alone in his office for a half to three-quarters of an hour: no one would dare disturb him then, no matter what. Everyone knew better.

A muffled jumble of sound: voices.

Oristano would be alone.

A shrill laugh, silence, the sound of bedsprings.

Hanson hefted the shovel in his hands.

The dust tickled his nose and tiny spiders scampered across his arms, across his face, like the touch of gentle, invisible fingers. They were the shy, albino spiders that inhabit dusty corners in dark buildings and spin gossamer out of disuse—they never saw the sun. They used Hanson for a highway, washing over him in a waterfall of velvet feet while he sat in the shadows and listened to the factory: the massive, deep-throated beat of pistons far below reechoed through every joint and seam of the building, conducted through cement and wood, shaking the room, shaking his blood, shaking the teeth in his head, shaking the brain inside his skull, boom*doom,* boom*doom,* boom*doom,* boom*doom,* until he was somehow on his feet, shaking uncontrollably, convulsively squeezing wood to keep it in his hands, shaking, being shaken, jarred, jostled, jolted, being frogmarched toward the door in a lurching stiff-legged stride, trying to remember that he had to wait, *wait,* although it was hard to remember what he had to wait for. He stopped just outside the door, fingertips resting on the wood, wondering why it didn't explode inward under the force of the pressure behind him, why it didn't shatter and fly to flinders, as he was shaken by the surge of the world that wrenched his bones out of his body, boom*doom,* boom*doom.*

Inside, voices again, louder now, another laugh, footsteps going away, the slamming of another and more distant door, a single set of heavy footsteps returning.

Suddenly smooth as silk and steady as skin, as if he had instantly shifted into a different gear, Hanson reached out and opened the door.

The room was dingy and cluttered: a table, two chairs, a cot, a wash basin, a cabinet. Oristano's broad back was toward the door—he had not heard it open. He was rummaging in the cabinet, taking out a hypodermic needle and a rusty spoon. An ancient revolver, symbol of his position and authority, sat in its holster on the table, three feet away.

Now, said Hanson's blood, *while his back is turned.* But instead he heard his own voice, as if from a great distance, speaking Oristano's name aloud, as a rock might speak, or ice.

Oristano knew death when he heard it. Without bothering to look around, he whirled and snatched for the table. His shadow swung and scurried like a crab behind him. He was awesomely fast for a man of his bulk. He had the gun in his hand and had brought it halfway around to bear before Hanson's shovel, swung in a short horizontal arc of immense force, crushed his head.

The force of the blow spun Oristano in a misty explosion of blood and brains, and hurled him heavily against the table, which splintered and collapsed. The table and Oristano went down together, in a tangle.

Except for the meaty slap of the shovel and the crack of breaking wood, there had been no sound.

The hypodermic needle teetered on the edge of the cabinet, then toppled very slowly to the floor. It shattered with a tiny glass cry, like the breaking of a fragile dream.

Hanson stood motionless, holding the shovel. His arms tingled from impact, and a splinter had dug into his palm. The blow had nearly decapitated Oristano and the body, in falling, had sprayed blood across half the room, the cot, the ceiling. Most of the spray had missed Hanson, but his face had been lightly, almost delicately, dusted with a fine sprinkling of droplets, as if he was a child playing at measles with garish red paint. He took one hand off the shovel and absently wiped at his eyes with his knuckles, smearing the blood. He continued to wipe at it, grinding it into his skin.

He looked down at Oristano's body. With his killing blow, with the first touch of impact, the red light in Hanson's mind had instantly

gone out, leaving him with no purpose or plan, drowned in the paralytic black light of despair. Now he was like a man waking, stupid and desolate, from a particularly evil dream—or else like a man swimming down from the border of dream into another, even more troubled sleep, unable to wake although he knows that he should. The room around him seemed blurred and vague, his memory of the past hour even more vague; he remembered his actions as if another man had done them while he watched, only dimly able to guess at that man's motives and feelings. Oristano's bloated corpse filled him with surprise and horror. He felt no emotional responsibility for it as yet, no sense of it being a child of his hands, but it seemed so charged with *outré* significance, so remarkable and unnatural an object in itself, that it flooded him with superstitious dread: he could imagine the shattered, faceless man rising, confronting him, embracing him with cold arms, smothering him. Absorbing him tracelessly into its bulk.

And now there was a sickness starting deep inside, a spreading numbness that drove the room even further away. He shook his head stupidly, baffled as a bull. He couldn't wake up. The room spitefully refused to change, to alter—it remained starkly and harshly the same, and he mired in the middle of it with murder in his hand and death all around. And now there was a noise, a scrape of wood on wood. Through numbing waves of nausea, he looked up.

Tac stood in the doorway: face bland as butter, eyes shrewd and malefic.

There was his doom, Hanson realized with tranced calm and logic. Tac was poised for flight, holding the door ready to slam after him; he was the entire length of the room away, on the other side of Oristano's body; from that other door the main entrance of the shift room was only six paces distant, down a short corridor—even if Hanson should try to attack him, all Tac would have to do was slam the door and run out into the shift room, shouting for help. Long before Hanson could hope to catch up to him and silence him—if Hanson could get his numb, leaden body to move at all—Tac would have the place boiling with workmen, watchmen, State Inspectors. Escape would be impossible—they would run him down in seconds, subdue him, take him away. Then the gallows, the block, a bullet in the head, maybe a public stoning or the stake since this had been a dull season in Orange. No way out. No way to stop Tac, no way to talk him into silence. Tac would surely get

a big promotion for turning Hanson in, and Hanson had nothing to bribe him with anywhere near the value. And to appeal to the charity of that sly, cruel creature would be like entreating fire not to burn.

All this in a second, Tac looming in the doorway, Hanson staring hopelessly at him across the tilted landscape of Oristano's corpse. Then, before either man had a chance to move, Tac's face suddenly changed: his slitted eyes widened enormously, huge with surprise; his cheeks puffed, his mouth gaped impossibly—all his broad face, all his stubby body seemed to swell, blowing up like a balloon, expanding like a pufferfish straining at the limits of his skin until it seemed certain he would explode and splatter. And then Tac went limp—ponderously he fell, first to his knees, then forward to his face, almost lazily, shouldering into death as a man settles into a warm and restful bed.

Gossard stepped into the room, behind Tac. There was a knife in his hand, and the blade steamed with new blood.

Orange is a sprawling, ugly town, situated a few miles west of the historic site of Old Orange, something to the north of what was once St. Cloud. It is made mostly of wood and fired clay, sunbaked mud, some sections of fine brick and iron put up during the fleeting prosperous decade of the Great Restoration when York was carving an empire out of the checkerboarded squabble of the northwest, before the fortunes of the State began to decline. It contains a large proportion of Utopian buildings, although few are completely standing, and only a very few are in anything resembling usable condition. It is primarily a trading town, serving as a funnel and middleman for the traffic between the Stabilities of Portland, Pitt, and the South, all of the trade that follows the main routes skirting the Wall of the City of God. It also contains what passes today for heavy industry, and is well known for leather tanning and textiles. It is the third largest city in York, and, since the destruction of Worcester, the most eastern of all the really big towns in the Human Domain, south of Portland.

Tonight, it simmered.

Deep in a parched, brutal summer, the city stewed and steamed like sluggish porridge over a flame. Heat poured in from the west, as though tilted from a giant's ladle, filled the city to the brim, and then hardened—like wax, like amber, catching and preserving everything within the fierce dry ocean of itself.

In Orange, all motion had stopped. The life of the city sunk to a torpid minimum, the occasional patient twitching of a toad buried in mud at the bottom of a riverbed, hiding from the sun. People huddled in their shanty homes, stunned by heat, stacked like corpses in the smothering dark. There was no wind. Torches burned without wavering, their smoke stretching straight up, as if they were lines attached to a hook in heaven. Heat swallowed sound like a mountain of feathers, damping it, sopping it up. Even the air itself seemed to have been sucked away, molecule by molecule, and replaced with a clear liquid glass that one could somehow breathe without ever quite suffocating completely, but which never afforded any comfort or relief.

To Hanson, sitting on top of an ancient Utopian freight transport crawling through Orange from the Docks toward South Gate, it seemed as if the hush and suspension of the night were aimed at him, as if the whole city were holding its breath in horror at what he had done. Or perhaps the city was gathering that breath for a great shout, a scream, the hush breaking in an instant and boiling with sudden faceless pursuit, the pointed finger, *there* he is, the contaminated one, the fugitive, the killer, *there,* and the horny, impersonal hands pulling him down, pulling him under, rending his bones apart in a single ecstatic explosion of blood … Hanson shifted his feet on the deckplates, bracing himself better against the rolling of the massive old machine. There was no pursuit yet. The shabby buildings of the Blackstone district watched him with disinterest, drooping lids of windows, slack-gaped mouths of doors, leaning against each other in weariness and defeat—they had seen too much, known too much, they didn't care about Hanson, or his crime.

The sweltering torpor of Orange suited Hanson's mood tonight—still half-dazed, drained and shaken by the violence of his passion at the factory, unable to keep up with a bewilderingly fast tumble of events. Like a graveyard, silent Orange was both disconcerting and peaceful, radiating an inevitable certainty of death that was oddly comforting. The city might have been an open grave, yawning dumbly at the stars, weighted down with dead but not yet filled in with raw earth. In many ways it was just that—an open grave; always had been, always would be, until the last of its scurvy inhabitants succumbed to disease, hunger, war, murder. And then would someone, Something, come along to kick the dirt down over man?

They had come up from the Docks without seeing anyone at all—unusual, since the magic, lumbering passage of a Utopian machine was a minor event, and normally the streets would have suddenly swirled with people at their approach, certainly hordes of grimy children, all hoping for a moment's release from the monotony and brutality of their lives. But the killing heat had won out over curiosity, over magic. Industry Hill had been deserted when they skirted around its base, as it had been earlier when Hanson had descended from the factory in the dazed clamor of his own blood. Even the State Inspectors who usually swarmed the Hill to guard against sneak thieves were hiding inside from the weather; but then, so too were the sneak thieves. As they rumbled through the edges of Prospect Terrace, Hanson had seen a drunk pissing contentedly on the fine stone house of a prosperous wool merchant—a harbinger of the slums, and a bellwether of the night: no SIs around to stop him, as he would usually have been intercepted long before reaching the Swank. Now, as they turned downhill toward the center of Blackstone and the Bog, and as the neighborhood crumbled and deteriorated appallingly, he saw people in the streets for the first time: sullen, sluggish crowds who were out on the street because they lived there, in the street; because they had nowhere else to go.

Behind him, the State Factory shouldered against darkness, an island of brazen light, a mountain of iron—an open flame flickered red from its top, like a tongue. Lesser industries, lesser buildings clustered around its massive flanks: attendants to the Lord of Hell. It was a sight he had seen every evening for fifteen years, but now it made him uneasy and afraid, as if the factory was watching him with hungry furnace eyes, as if it would stride monstrously after him on legs made of stone and shadow, a demon cat after a mouse. It would have Oristano's face.

Murderer, he thought, trying it on for size.

In spite of himself, he turned his head every few seconds while they crawled down the slope to the Bog, keeping an eye on the factory until it was swallowed by a jumble of low roofs, as Industry Hill sunk below the outskirts of Blackstone.

Gossard had saved him.

The feral half of Hanson's mind, the killer that had taken control to hunt Oristano, had thought itself clever—dodging the watchmen and State Inspectors, stalking its prey, waiting in ambush. But Tac had been much smarter than Hanson. He had sensed Hanson's anguish and

turmoil, figured out what Hanson would do before Hanson himself knew, extrapolated the consequences and decided how best to turn them to his financial advantage; laying an ambush of his own to catch Hanson murdering Oristano. And Gossard had been smarter than Tac. Gossard had seen Tac skulking near the washroom, and had figured the whole tangle out in one intuitive, empathetic flash: what Hanson was doomed to do, what Tac's avarice would drive him to do in response, and what he himself must do to save his friend's life. And he had, setting a counter-ambush to silence Tac before he could betray Hanson.

In the whole web of intrigue, only Hanson had been stupid.

Passion had driven him to a blind crime, poorly conceived, clumsily executed—*stupid.* Only luck had saved him, for the moment, from the consequences of the act. And he was still stupid—now he was *fleeing* stupidly, blindly, stumblingly, with no plan, no purpose, no destination. If not for Gossard, Hanson told himself bitterly, he would probably still be standing in Oristano's office like a heatstruck ox, waiting dumbly for the SIs to come and collect him. It had been Gossard who had gotten him going again, who had jolted him a little out of his daze, who had set the mechanism of escape in motion. It had been Gossard who had locked the doors to Oristano's office from the outside and, leading Hanson by the elbow like a sleepwalker, helped him dodge the watchmen and make his way safely outside the factory. And it was also Gossard who destroyed the fantasy of Hanson concealing his guilt: everyone in the factory knew of the vendetta between Hanson and Oristano, and the moment Oristano was found dead, everyone would know who had killed him. The factory SIs wouldn't even bother to carry out an investigation. They'd know who to arrest.

"Get out of Orange tonight," Gossard had said. "Get as far away as you can before morning, and keep on going. They'll put their hands on you if you're anywhere in the city, but if you skip entirely, go up the country, they won't look for you very far. Oristano wasn't *that* important. But get out quick. And don't tell anybody where you're going—" And he'd looked up at Hanson out of his sick, fat face, more strained and pale than ever with the heat. Hanson had realized, in one of those flashes of intuition that approach prophecy, that Gossard didn't have much longer to live, that his health had deteriorated too far to stand the summer ahead, that Gossard probably knew it, that certainly both of them were aware they'd never see each other again, and found nothing in his vocabulary adequate to that

kind of goodbye. So they'd stared at each other for a long, awkward moment until Hanson finally blurted "Come with me," knowing as soon as he said it that Gossard would never desert his family and could never get them safely out of Orange, that Gossard would play out his role till he dropped, knowing what would happen but unable to get off the wheel. Gossard had merely shaken his head, said "Luck," and lumbered back into the factory, shutting the service door behind him, committing Hanson to the night.

With luck, Hanson had until the morning, maybe until noon, to get out of Orange. When Oristano missed tonight's inspection tours, it would be assumed that he had taken too much dope, or drank too much whisky, and was sleeping it off in his office behind locked doors. It had happened before; nobody would think too much of it, nobody would dare try to wake him up. Probably nobody would begin to wonder until sometime tomorrow. Then they would try to wake Oristano by knocking, try again, and eventually someone would have the guts to go find a master key and investigate. Maybe noon, maybe not.

And where was he supposed to *go?*

Nowhere on foot, that had been certain. Even dazed, he retained that much logic. The nearest village was Garfield, thirty miles away, and that hardly more than an SI garrison to maintain an old stone bridge over the Passaic. Too far, in one sense, over dangerous ground, alone. Not far *enough,* quick enough, in another sense. It was unlikely they'd bother to search that far afield for him, but if they did he'd be finished: only one usable road to Garfield, only two roads out of Garfield north, and more than thirty miles to the next village—he could be easily run down by mounted men, who just might check Garfield because it was the obvious place for a fugitive afoot to go. And once he started out on foot, he'd stay on foot. Orange was the only place within a hundred miles where he might be able to find an alternative to walking.

And so he'd gone to the Docks, and his luck had held. There had been four caravans loading up at the land-docks, in spite of the heat and the late hour—the Docks were the deep-beating heart of the city's commerce, of its life, and they never shut down. Three of the caravans were hauled by the clumsy, potbellied steam-tractors, all pig iron and pistons, boisterous and bellowing. The fourth was headed by a sleek Utopian transport, an untarnishable, indefatigable giant of high steel, twelve feet tall by thirty feet long, more than four hundred years old and still running as smoothly and perfectly as an engineer's dream, run-

ning continuously for all of those four centuries without need of refueling or repair—magic. It had been built long before the creation of the ancient and venerable Government of the State of York, and it would probably be around long after the State had guttered and died, maybe even after there were any men left in the dwindling world to run her. But now, in the haunted interregnum of Earth, she was captained by Johann Willis and headed north this trip, to the Stabilities of Portland. And Johann Willis was an acquaintance of Hanson's. Not a close friend, but an acquaintance, and an occasional drinking companion—and the uncle of Hanson's dead wife, Hanson's Becky, down and dead in the flinty soil of York for more than four years. That was a blood-bond between them. Maybe it would be enough.

They reached the bottom of the slope and turned right, paralleling the open, ceramic-lined sewage trench that ran down the middle of Canal Street. The transport lurched as the road changed from worn cobblestone to thigh-deep mud, then its massive treads found traction and it steadied—the clumsy steam-tractors sometimes foundered in the rutted morasses that passed for streets in this section of summer Orange, but the ancient transport was nearly unstoppable. It wallowed ponderously along Canal Street, throwing a wake of mud on either side. Dense clouds of mosquitos and stinging black flies rose up out of the mire at the transport's approach, and settled again, swirling and buzzing angrily, when it had passed. Hanson swore irritably and slapped at his face; almost immediately, he was bitten again, on the back of his hand and then on the neck. Degald, the Mate, grinned at Hanson from his position on the broad spine of the transport—he was wearing a hood of fine-meshed netting, and heavy black leather gloves in spite of the heat. "A bitch, a'n't it?" Degald shouted jovially over the pounding of the engines. "But you gots to get flies, *ai?* The whole place's made out of shit!" The Mate grinned at Hanson again, enormously, revealing a mouth crowded with crooked, broken snaggleteeth. Degald seemed to be having a fine time. And another two flies bit Hanson.

Dispiritedly, Hanson pulled his head as far into his coat as he could, like a turtle. It was, if possible, even hotter here than it had been on the Hill, and the stench alone was almost enough to knock a man down and kill him: offal, carrion, endless middens of hundred-year-old garbage, raw industrial sewage running through the Ditch, rank and sulfurous clouds of chemical smoke drifting downwind from the factories

on Industry Hill. This was the center of the Bog, the Valley, the Sink, whichever you wanted to call it—the cancerous, ulcerated underbelly of Orange, the nadir of a city where even the rich had never risen too very far above subsistence. Rickety, narrow buildings lined Canal Street by the hundreds, rearing precariously up on either side of the open sewage trench, the Ditch, like rheumy, arthritic animals who had come down to drink of the foul water before they died. Some of these hovels were nine or ten stories high, and none of them were wider across the base than the width of a single room. They were made of mismatched wooden beams, bricks, paving-stones, all stuck together with clay and mud and mortar any way they would hold—some of them were so unsteady that they had to be propped up with poles braced in the ground, and all of them would sway and totter sickeningly in any kind of a wind. There was seldom even a handsbreadth of space between one structure and another, and many actually did lean against their neighbors, so that if a building did finally collapse, it usually took two or three others with it. No matter: a horde of homeless people and "contractors" would swarm through the rubble, strip—and sometimes eat—the corpses, and salvage what building materials they could. Within a few weeks, new buildings would have been raised under the brutal direction of the "contractors," cannibalized from the debris of the fallen, and people would be bribing and murdering with total ruthlessness to obtain the privilege of inhabiting them. This had been going on for hundreds of years, and it was doubtful that any building in the Bog had survived intact; they all toppled down into junk and were reassembled out of that same junk, over and over again, like shabby phoenixes. Every decade or so, a fire would rip through the Bog and destroy huge swaths of it, followed inevitably by Plague, a year or two later. But the Bog was indestructible—it would eat a little deeper into Blackstone, transforming the swallowed sections into the Bog; building materials would be found somewhere, somehow, and the hovels would rise again. And soon everything would be just about the same as it had ever been.

This had been my life, Hanson thought numbly, staring into the depths of the leprous warrens. A little bit better, perhaps, but not much. Blackstone instead of the Bog. Malnutrition instead of outright starvation, lingering sickness instead of immediate death. At least a pretense of a roof over his head, although some winters he'd wondered if it could be much colder even out on the street. A difference only in degree, not

in kind. That was what he had bought with his youth, with his life. With Becky. And always the underlying threat of the Bog, of a fall into the Bog. Inevitable, waiting for all of them when they could no longer work hard enough to keep themselves out of it. In the end, all roads led downhill to it, to the Bog.

There was a fresh corpse floating in the Ditch, and he watched it bob and swirl with the current until, just before it was too far behind to see, two men with a travois fished it out of the water.

Ahead, the crowds became denser. The transport slowed, slowed again, almost—but not quite—coming to a stop. It inched through the muck, ponderous and irresistible. The crowd parted reluctantly around it—sometimes a man would wait until the giant treads were almost touching him before his courage broke and he foundered out of the way, slipping, falling, rolling. And then he would climb up out of the mud—plastered and stinking with it, rubbing it out of his eyes—and spit at the transport, or shake his fist. Hanson could see mouths moving in the crowd, teeth bared, men grinning with hate; he could hear shouts and obscenities, rising thinly above the sound of the engine. Someone threw a clot of mud that spattered against the deckplates; another. These were the dregs of the Bog: lobos, offenders whom even the casual butcher that was State justice found too unimportant to kill; homeless and unregistered children; junkies; gene-scrambled sports; decrepit whores; the infirm, the aged, the blacklisted—all those who couldn't work, or were not allowed to. They lived like wild dogs, on garbage, on what they could steal, on each other. They slept in the street, on the steps of the shanty homes of the more fortunate poor, in alcoves, under bridges. By the thousands. And every winter they died, by the thousands. And every spring there was another thousand, or two, to replace them—filtering down, no longer able to hold even a place in the middle terrace of Bog society. Their despair was a tangible pressure, black as coal; the heat crushed it into hate, diamond-bright, diamond-hard hate, tight and dangerous, gave it something to work on. There was a solid wall of men a few yards in front of the transport, and they did not look like they were going to move. Some of them were holding knives, some clubs, some torches, and their faces made the flesh crawl around Hanson's stomach and groin. Suppose one of them had a bow, or a javelin, or a scorpion—

Up in the cab, Johann Willis hit the whistle. The giant bellow of it slammed the high building walls on either side of the road and washed back, filling the world. The faces of the crowd went slack, shattered by sound, and then firmed up again when reason returned. But they had been shaken. They clutched their weapons uneasily and blinked around them, as the thunder died in grumbling echoes from the street. Willis hit the whistle again. The crowd was ready for it this time, but they still flinched, and when their faces set themselves up again, a little determination had gone out of them. The whistle blasted twice more. Buffeted, the rickety shanty buildings swayed and trembled, and a board crosswalk connecting two of them was jolted loose: it fell, sending an onlooker who had been lounging on it hurtling twenty feet down into the mud. Incongruously, someone in the crowd laughed. And instantly, as if that was his cue, Degald was on his feet and at the edge of the deck, leaning out, bracing himself against a stanchion. He had pushed the netting back from his face, and his revolver was in his hand. "*Move* your asses!" Degald screamed. *"Move 'em!"* He was grinning ferociously at the crowd; his eyes flickered back and forth, very fast, and the revolver moved with his gaze, so that first one man, then another found himself staring straight into the gun's ugly muzzle. Willis had poked his head up above the three-quarter shield of the cab—he said nothing, but he raised an ancient repeating rifle and slowly brought it down so that it was braced against his left forearm. Degald shouted again. When the crowd did not move, he seemed to be amused. His grin softened into a smile that was even more frightening. "Move, Goddamn you," he said, not at all loudly, almost with affection. *"Move."* There was something infinitely hard in his voice, riding it like a carrier beam, and the crowd flinched at the sound of it. Hesitantly, they moved—men stepping back, then changing their minds and stepping forward, then stepping back again. Willis caught the ripple of movement; he must have made some imperceptible signal, because the whistle screamed again at that moment, longer and louder than before. At once, the crowd broke. Grudgingly, they flowed aside, like some heavy, sluggish liquid, and let the transport through. Most of them didn't look up as it passed; they studied their feet and slogged wearily away through the mud. Willis ducked back down into the cab. In a moment, the transport was picking up speed once more. Its whistle hooted again and again, scornful in victory.

Degald came walking back along the spine, rolling effortlessly with the motion of the vehicle. He sat down next to Hanson and patted the revolver in its holster. "No sweat," he said, "no problem." He grinned at Hanson. "Sometimes we gots to really *shoot* a couple, when they gets, you know, real stubborn. Mule-headed. They gets real mule-headed, in the hot weather." He spat, casually. "Or just run them right over. *Ai,* that's even better, that works real good. But they *a'ways* move. Eventu'ly. *Oh* yes." And he flipped the netting back down over his face with his thumb, and settled back against another stanchion. He looked very comfortable. He didn't move or speak again for a long while, and he might almost have been asleep. But his eyes glittered through the mesh, and they missed nothing.

Hanson tried several words on his tongue, but none of them worked.

He sat in prudent silence, and swatted blackflies.

In another half hour, the transport had crawled through South Gate, and was beginning to pull clear of Orange. There wasn't too much in the way of suburbs: one or two quarries, a few truck farms, some night-shrouded gypsy trading camps, a large garrison of the standing Army of York—carefully not allowed *inside* the city itself since the last 'reorganization'/palace revolution/civil war—a deserted roadside shrine, and then, after a long stretch of nothing, a final SI post commanding a crossroads. No outlying villas, or estates, or summer homes, or middle-class residential areas, as there might have been in another age. It was dangerous to live outside the city walls, and few did, except for the gypsies and free-traders who were themselves too feral to be afraid, and the armed troops who were there to keep marauders away from the city—and the marauders, of course.

And then Orange was gone, completely, and the night closed in, black and smothering. The transport's headlight, at medium intensity, pushed the night about fifty yards away in front, but it closed down behind them even more dark and menacing, as if it resented the intrusion of the light. Degald sent the other two crewmen walking down the train to hang lanterns at the couplings, and one at the tail. The transport was pulling a train load of eight cars this trip, and the lanterns helped the driver judge the position of that long, awkward tail accurately enough to get around curves without jackknifing it. The wood-and-iron freight cars were clumsy, ponderous things, but the transport pulled them eas-

ily, and could have pulled four times their number if the poor condition of the roads did not disallow it. To compensate, the cars were built deep and filled to overflowing—their loads barely contained by the tarpaulins lashed down taut over every car—and the cargo hold of the transport itself, under Hanson's feet, was stuffed full of the smallest and most valuable items. In spite of the weight, the transport moved swiftly through the darkness, sure and graceful, and Hanson was once again filled with rueful awe at the skill of the Utopian artisans. It was easy to understand the attitude of people like Relk; indeed, of most people—Hanson knew, intellectually, that the transport was 'merely' a product of superior engineering, but it still seemed like magic to him, and he responded to it in that way, emotionally. The gap between those ancient people and himself was too great; so much had been lost and forgotten …

They were running through a stretch of scrub forest that alternated with sand and clay barrens. It was desolate, forlorn country, especially by starlight on a moonless night. They followed a curve around the shoulder of a small hill; there was a light way up the hill, just below the crest, the lit window of a building shrouded by trees. It shone high and lonely, a cold star riding above the earth, below the sky. Then the road dipped, and it was gone. Hanson realized that he would never know what the building was, or who lived there, or why, or if someone had been at that window, listening to the transport breathe mournfully by in the night, watching the lanterns bob like a string of blurred red jewels, perhaps wondering what eyes rode the train and were looking invisibly back up. The thought made Hanson sad. Life was like that—you rushed by others in the dark without knowing they were there, you left them behind; each minute buried a thousand possibilities, each turning killed a thousand alternate lives, and you had to say farewell constantly to people you would never meet. And still you rushed on. Hanson became aware that Degald was watching him closely, although he could no longer see the Mate's eyes. He forced himself to relax, to sink back down against the deckplates. He was trembling. Nothing then but night and motion, until they pulled abreast of another SI outpost, a big half-timbered building surrounded by a tall earthwork wall, ablaze with torches, Bloomfield Station. A potbellied SI in his shirtsleeves, a half-eaten chicken drumstick in one hand, stood by the side of the road and waved them on. An embankment ahead, tall and *long*, diagonally across their path. And a ramp.

The transport had been heading east, more or less. Now it flowed up the ramp, turned left, and began to crawl north. This was an ancient highway, unbelievably huge in comparison to modern roads—a half-dozen transports could have traveled it abreast without crowding each other, and it stretched on endlessly ahead, dead black, like a frozen river made out of the night-fabric itself. The transport picked up speed. On such a good surface, Willis was certain to open it all the way up; he would be unable to for seven-eighths of the trip. They rocked and clicked along at a terrifying clip, but even Hanson knew that this was the safest part of the journey. The highway was one of the major arteries—and assets—of the State. It stretched from the southern counties, where it was chopped off sheer by the Wall below Iselin, all the way up to Spring Valley in the north, where it was possible, after a break, to take another old road up to Newburgh and Kingston Center. It'd been cleared of rubble and occasional blockages by a massive project during the Restoration, and now it was zealously guarded by the State—there would be SI garrisons every fifteen or twenty miles along its length.

The whistle hooted once, and Degald went up to relieve the Captain. In a moment, Willis came back along the spine, massaging the tension out of his shoulder. He squatted down next to Hanson. He was still carrying the rifle; on caravan, it was chained to his wrist, and it never left him—he even slept with it. It was nearly irreplaceable, and worth more than some of the cargo. That reminded Hanson of Oristano's revolver, wrapped heavily in oilskin and hidden in Hanson's pouch—Gossard's idea; he'd never've had the presence of mind to think of it. Stealing the revolver was alone enough to earn him the death penalty; in fact it was probably a more serious offense than the killing of Oristano. Thinking that, Hanson smiled. They could only hang him once, after all.

He greeted the captain, and they talked of the trivial things people talk of when something is making them uncomfortable in each other's presence. Imperceptibly, Willis edged the conversation around, and, after a while, Hanson realized that Willis was fishing for more information on why he was leaving Orange. To get the ride, he'd told Willis a compendium of half-truths about being laid off and blacklisted, and that he was leaving, simply, to survive. Willis knew of the enmity between Oristano and Hanson, and the tale was credible enough, except for Hanson's desire to leave Orange *immediately,* with only the clothes

on his back. He had explained that away as a desire to avoid possible further prosecution by Oristano—since, as a blacklistee, he was outside the law and anyone could do anything at all to him with perfect impunity from the State—and the fact that he stood a better chance of getting a ride from Willis than from another captain. It was a good story, but Hanson was a poor liar, and Willis was very sharp. Hanson had no way of knowing how much of the story Willis believed, if he believed any of it.

"So what will you do now?" Willis asked. "You have any plans at all?"

"No," Hanson said, "just to get out of Orange, is all. I a'n't got a chance in Hell there. Upcountry, at least maybe I can get some kind of piss-ass job, someway. Don't know what, but I'm a dead man if I stay."

"Ayah," Willis said, "that's true, right enough." He sighed. He was a tall, lanky man, about ten years older than Hanson, with a face like a weathered stone hatchet. His hair was heavily streaked with grey, but he held his squatting position effortlessly, rocking slightly heel-to-toe to balance against the motion of the transport. He turned his head and stared steadily at Hanson. He had an intricate, compassionate face, but it was a grim one nevertheless—there was something unshakable in it, as cold and hard as flint. It was a face of a man accustomed to command and in the habit of depending on no one or nothing other than himself. "That's true," he repeated musingly. He shrugged, and ponderously aimed his face away from Hanson, as if it was very heavy and moved on hinges. But his eyes flicked back again. His eyes were a restless, glittering black, like those of a magpie or an ancient crow. They would fix on something, absorb it completely, flick to something else. "What was it you said you got canned for?" he asked.

"Didn't say," Hanson said. Then he told him, making it up as he went along. He wasn't very good at this sort of thing, and he had the feeling that he was floundering in deeper and deeper. Probably he had contradicted himself a half-dozen times already; it was hard to remember what he'd said even a moment ago. He was numb and confused and deeply sad, and that desperate, hysterical depression was building up again—he could feel it crying and yammering inside his belly, like a little trapped animal. He finished his story and sat resignedly, waiting to see if Willis was going to challenge him on it.

"Ayah," Willis said at last, "a bad thing." His eyes flicked away from Hanson, flicked back, flicked away. "A shame and a Goddamned waste," he said. "Piss your life away—" He stopped, sighed, scratched his ear with his finger, sighed again. After a long pause he said, "Making good time tonight."

"Ai," Hanson said.

"Ayah," Willis said.

They fell silent.

Another caravan was coming down the highway toward them, probably headed south to Orange. This one was hauled by one of the clumsy steam-tractors, puffing and clattering horrendously, belching fire-shot clouds of black smoke, its great pistons thudding back and forth. It sounded like a giant's sackful of pots and plates being dragged across rocky ground. The two big vehicles hooted at each other as they passed. The sound rolled wistfully around the low hills until it was blotted up by the thick pine woods. Willis shifted position restlessly. He ran a hand up through his greying hair, brought it down to tug at his earlobe, but didn't say anything after all. Hanson was aware that Willis was wrestling with some complex emotion, but there was no way to tell exactly what it was. They sat silently while the transport clicked up a slight rise. To the west, the country opened out into extensive piney woods, but to the east, Hanson knew, there was nothing but five or six miles of low, weed-overgrown rubble, the tangled ruins of broken Utopian buildings, inhabited only by coyotes, chimeras—sports too gene-scrambled even to be regarded as human—and abandoned children who had grown up completely feral. Even the bandits preferred to camp in the woods usually. It was safer there, in spite of the wolves and the killercatchers.

Then they topped the rise and they could see the Wall itself, immense, smoldering with pinks and coral-reds, burning without flame: the Wall of the City of God. Running roughly parallel with the highway here, only five miles away, it looked almost close enough to touch. But your hand would burn, Hanson thought. It would surely burn.

"Lookit that, now," Willis said.

"Ai," Hanson said, mistaking the emotion in Willis's voice. His own heart had thudded painfully at first sight of it, and his breath had sucked in, in spite of himself. "It's very beautiful."

Willis turned to look at Hanson. His eyes had slitted up and somehow, subtly, he seemed to be crouching now, where before he had been merely squatting. He stared long and intently at Hanson. Then he made a small disgusted sound in his throat and turned back to look at the Wall. His eyes had widened, and the radiance of the Wall was reflected in them in tiny burning highlights. When he spoke again, his voice was flat and hard. "I hate it," he said. And he spat, emphatically, in the direction of the Wall. And he got up and walked back to the cab, without another word.

Hanson sat up awhile, trying to puzzle it out. But exhaustion, long-denied, rolled over him like a mountain coming down, and he tied himself to a stanchion with his belt, and he went to sleep.

He awoke briefly as they were crossing the Passaic, and he realized that the sound of the whistle signaling to the SI garrison had been wailing through his dreams. He had pictured it as the cry of a huge black bird, wings wide, falling blind through the encrusted and ornamental air. Then his head lolled, and he slept.

He woke again, later, surrounded by motion and blackness. The Wall still blazed across the world, burning its image into the jelly of his retinas. He closed his eyes against the light.

And opened them again at dawn. They were in the process of crossing the Hudson, at Montgomerytown, where a bridge had survived enough intact to be capable of repair by the artisans of the Great Restoration. The Wall was no longer visible, though afterimages of it seemed to smolder in Hanson's still sleep-fogged mind. It had begun its great slow curve east of north, crossing the Hudson below Ossining—cutting straight across the water, the river disappearing under the Wall and out of the knowledge of men. Some said that the river met the sea at last, behind the Wall, inside the City of God. But no one Hanson knew had ever seen the ocean—with the possible exception of Willis—and it was a thing as impossible to picture as the City itself. Occasionally a fishing-boat or a canoe would be swept under the Wall by the current, but the crews never returned, and the river kept its secret.

Here the Hudson ran swift and fierce, as if impatient for its translation into the realms of the Divine, at Ossining. It was a wet, chilly morning. A breeze skimmed silver mists from the broad, gunmetal surface of the river; they boiled up around the black iron of the bridge, and swirled off into the lightening upper air. The sun was just climbing over

a forest ridge to the east, sending broad fans of smoky light slantwise through the mist, striking bright highlights from the oily, turbulent water. The span boomed hollow under the transport, buzzed, boomed, buzzed. They were in the middle of the bridge, with everything grey and raw blue and silver-orange, the sky opening into hot gold east, night dying away to the west, the river rolling a humped shoulder below. Hanson felt something move inside, something slip, like a landslide in his head; he was leaving everything he'd ever known, everyone he'd ever known, behind. Then up the steep, thick-wooded slope of the opposite bank, and time for one last look back at the Hudson as it wound toward Ossining, back over all the lands stretching away toward Orange, where he had kept his life. Beaded with cold dew and slapped by raw morning wind, Hanson wondered if he felt regret or relief. And could not decide. And the river sank away behind, and was gone.

Early that evening, the transport rolled to a stop in a nondescript clearing in the woods. There was a pile of rubble in one corner that maybe used to be a house, and, among the weeds, a blistered tangle of Utopian machinery, made of an alloy so complexly specific to its task that it had no value even to the scavengers that ranged out from the cities and smallest towns of York like starveling dogs in search of something, anything, that would keep their worthless lives going yet another day. It had memory, down to the molecular level; you could melt it down and pour it into ingots, but, cooling, it would re-form itself into its original shape.

Much like a man's life, Hanson thought—you could melt it down in the fire, change it completely, but old habits and old ways of thought would reform it again in the same pattern somewhere else. Once a loser, always a loser. Once a fool, always a fool.

Hanson took advantage of the stop to hop down off the deckplates and make his way into the musky-smelling stand of staghorn sumac by the rubble-midden and take a leak. His piss steamed in the cold evening air, and tiny clodhoppers rose to the surface of the ground to soak in it, preening, pirouetting with evident pleasure and spreading their miniature fans wide. Willis had disappeared around the back of the transport, and Degald stayed with the cab, face set into bored immobility.

Willis's irascible voice sounded. "Hanson! Git on back here!"

"A'right. Coming!" Hanson shook free the last drop of pee, buttoned his trousers, and trudged around to the back of the transport.

Willis raised the rifle and pointed it right at his gut.

A kind of sizzle passed through Hanson, a cold and stinging surge of fear. As quietly as he could, he said, "What's this about?"

"You *know* what it's about." Willis held the rifle steady, no posturing, and no way he could miss at this distance, a man to whom the gun held no glamour but was just another tool to be used with a minimum of waste-motion and fuss.

"Listen," Hanson said, and then lapsed into silence. What could he possibly say? That numb despair and resignation were seeping back in, soaking into his bones the way his piss had soaked into the black dirt and the preening hoppers, making it impossible for him to speak. He knew that he should plead for his life, but he couldn't summon the energy to do it. He should have known that he could never get away, never get free of the morass of Orange and the mess he'd made of his life. He should have known that everything would catch up to him, that the world would reach out and crush him as casually as he would crush a bug. He *had* known that, in fact, known it with a fatalism that was deeply ingrained in the marrow of his bones. He'd fooled himself into forgetting it for a moment, into letting himself feel a moment of relief and hope, and now the retribution when it came, when Willis squeezed the trigger of the rifle and the bullet ripped his body apart, would be even more bitter and black by comparison. His luck had never been good; he'd allowed himself to think for a while that it was turning, but now, as he should have known it would, it had run out entirely instead. He cursed himself for the hundred opportunities he'd let go by to slip over the side of the transport and disappear into the wilderness between towns, where he might have carved out a living of some sort for himself. He had a gun, there were brigands he could join … But now it was too late. Maybe it always had been too late.

After all, what did it really matter? If Willis didn't kill him now, sooner or later the Crab in his belly *would*.

They stared at each other over the sights of Willis's rifle. A wind came up and swirled dust around Hanson's feet.

For what seemed like a very long time, neither man spoke.

At last Willis nodded to the side. Hanson's knapsack sat there, in the shadow of the transport, old and frayed, pathetically small. "You're family," Willis said, "of sorts. Blood's thicker'n water, they say. Can't bring myself to kill you. But I won't let myself be used neither."

Hanson nodded, said nothing. The moment of crisis wasn't over; he knew that there was still time for Willis to change his mind.

"A man like you," Willis said. "A man like you—" Instead of finishing the thought, he noisily cleared his throat and spat a great gob of phlegm to the side. Then, raising his voice, he shouted, "Degald! Get off yer thumb and let's get out of here!"

As Willis strode off Hanson noticed for the first time that he had a slight limp, a stiffness in one leg that caused him to pull up slightly at the top of each stride. Willis was getting old, too. They were all getting old. To match the world, which was itself old, old and worn-out and weary, grown grey with the dust of millions of generations of lives and stained black with the residue of innumerable sins.

Hanson stood there for a long time, staring at the train pulling away until it had dwindled to a distant string of moving red jewels, and then, after it had vanished completely, at the empty road itself, a grey streak through blackness.

The night gathered around him. Crows exploded up out of the trees on the crest of a distant hill, startled by some noise in the forest, wheeling against the darkening sky and crying out harshly as they flew in some guttural language he could not understand, finally settling back down into the treetops again. Then there was only silence, broken occasionally by the soughing of the wind through the trees, and by the distant and plaintive chime-like sobbing of some unknown creature far away among the trees in the dark.

At last, when he could stand the quiet and the black eventlessness no longer, he stooped to pick up his knapsack. The gun was still there, wrapped in his second pair of trousers. He stuck it in his belt.

There was a trail, hardly more than a deer run, that ran through the clearing here at right angles to the road, and briefly he vacillated between the two directions it proffered him. Then, because it hardly mattered, he chose one at random, and started walking.

The sun had gone out of the sky entirely now, the last orange cloud of sunset guttering from red to purple-grey to sullen black, and only the soft light from the Wall suffused the wood, flushing it with an unearthly coral glow that cast strange iridescent shadows with blood-red edges. Hanson had been traveling for hours, following the trail through the rubble of Utopian ruins, imperishable foundations filled with waters rust-red and turquoise-blue from chemical poisons leached out of

the surrounding soil, and the occasional rotting and incomprehensible machine, the remnants of a centuries-long Retreat from the bright dwellings of the Utopians. He pushed his way through woods spotted with feral ornamentals and fruit trees that over the ages had drifted away from their original functions and now produced fruit indigestible to human stomachs … or that perhaps had been designed in the first place to feed unknown and long-vanished races, strange and inhuman races that had been so thoroughly forgotten that neither their names nor even the memory of their presence had survived, save only for the trees. In all this time, he had seen nobody and arrived nowhere, but only walked, unthinking, like an automaton.

Then he saw the glint of firelight up ahead.

He stopped. Whoever or whatever was before him, it was probably best to avoid them altogether. Only outlaws, bandits, or worse, would be out in these unwholesome ruins. Honest men would have no reason to be here.

Thinking this, he could almost have laughed. He had nothing in common with honest men anymore. He was an outlaw himself now, cast out from human company like a manshogger or pariah dog.

In the darkness, somebody coughed.

Hanson stiffened in astonishment. The cough had been quiet and deliberate, a noise he was *meant* to hear. There was a lookout guarding the path, unseen, and he had just been warned that if he tried to turn away now, he was as good as dead. No help for it, he had to go forward, follow the light to its source, seek common cause with whatever human refuse clustered about its warmth. He belonged there now, after all, didn't he?

Pushing through a stand of bamboo, he entered a clearing. Dark forms hunkered about the campfire, as stolidly motionless as so many apes. They looked up incuriously at his approach, firelight flickering in their eyes. There were at least a dozen of them, perhaps as many as fifteen or sixteen; the half-light, guttering and then flaring again sporadically, made it hard to tell exactly. The pale, near-human corpse of a thant, spitted on a stick, was roasting over the fire. The peculiar stench of the roasting meat filled the clearing, thick and pungent and strange, hovering uneasily somewhere between appetizing and nauseating.

With a swagger he did not feel, Hanson strode into the light, ostentatiously loosening the gun in his belt, making sure they all got a

good look. Paradoxically, the bright fire gathered darkness about itself, blinding him, making him perfectly vulnerable. He cleared his throat. "Who's boss here?"

For a long moment nobody moved. It was as if he had asked a deeper and more profound question than they were prepared to address, as if he'd challenged them to count the stars in the sky or riddle him the meaning of human pain or draw a street map of the City of God.

He was sweating now; the fire seemed to roar up inside of him. He kept one hand firm on the butt of the revolver, though it was really useless here—easiest thing in the world to come up from behind and brain him with a rock if that's what they had a mind to do. The gun, the fabulously valuable gun, only made him so much less secure, for it gave them something to gain from his death.

Under the pervasive wood smoke and the unsettling odor of the roasting thant, he could smell where they went to shit, not bothering even to put a decent distance between themselves and their leavings, and this told him a great deal about the sort of men they were. Careless men. Irresponsible men. He felt a gut-deep disapproval of the lot of them. Even outlaws—no, make that *especially* outlaws—needed discipline.

But they were dangerous nonetheless, perhaps even more dangerous for that very lack of discipline.

A frighteningly ordinary-looking man stood up. "Name's Mahoney." He looked a little to either side, as a man with dogs might, if he were not perfectly secure in his control of his hounds. "Ye're a far way from home."

"Ayah." As nonchalantly as he could, Hanson said, "Looking for someone to hook up with."

Mahoney considered the gun, looked at the imposing size and bulk of Hanson, and drew the obvious conclusions. "Ever kill a man?"

Hanson nodded slowly. "I guess." The words hung heavy before him. It was the first time he had admitted his terrible crime aloud.

Mahoney twisted his hand strangely and a knife appeared in it. He walked toward and then past Hanson, to the remains of the thant charring over the fire, and sliced off a slab.

"Go back to your post," he said to the still-unseen man behind Hanson. Then he thrust the meat into Hanson's hands. "Eat."

So it was, with a one-word command and a mouthful of meat so repugnant that he barely managed to force it down, that Hanson joined the band of outlaws. He was ravenous, but after that first bite, he quietly set the meat aside. He had proved his obedience. Maybe tomorrow there'd be something more wholesome to eat. And if not … well, he'd see.

Suddenly, a little man leaped up on top of a log to the smoky side of the campfire. The firelight leaped and jumped on his sunken features, and he worked his loose and toothless mouth for a bit before he spoke. "Praise God!" he cried. Then, lowering his voice so that he was speaking almost confidentially, "We are all of us insane. And yet, it is not our fault!"

With good-natured disdain, the outlaws turned to look at him.

"We can't help it. It's the Wall's fault. Its existence forces us to acknowledge that our reality is out of phase with our desires. But we cannot admit this. We *cannot.* So, in denying it, we go mad. This is called cognitive dissonance."

Sitting on the log beside him, Mahoney grinned wolfishly. "The Preacher's in one of his moods. This oughta be good."

"Angels used to walk the Earth, indistinguishable among men. They could pass through the Wall at will, because they had subjugated themselves to the will of Heaven. And, if angels could do so, then why not you and I?"

"Tell it, Preach," one of the men said sardonically.

Encouraged, the little man waved his arms. He spoke feverishly, with a passionate intensity. "Man and Heaven must be reconciled. Once I was a great man, a worldly man, learned in all the things that did not matter. I spent my days among the archives of Harrisburg. Until finally I realized that Reconciliation was my destiny, and began the search for the key." He looked around to either side. "And I found it!" he said triumphantly. "I found the key to Heaven, and I hold it within me. Right in here!" He slapped his chest enthusiastically. "It's wrapped around my heart, dearer than life, closer than breath, and it will open the—" He faltered and paused. "Open the—" His voice trailed off, and he looked around vaguely. "What was I about to—?"

One of the men pursed his lips and made a lewd sucking noise. The others laughed uproariously. The light of fanaticism went out of

the little man, his face collapsing into pathos and misery, body slumping like balloon with a slow leak.

Hanson felt sickened. There was only one reason such a group of men would tolerate this broken creature. Worse, to survive here, to gain their acceptance, to be recognized as one of their kind, a man who didn't set himself above his fellows, he would have to avail himself of the Preacher's services as well. And he didn't think he could. There were limits, there had to be limits, to what a man would do to survive. Let it pass, he told himself, nobody's expecting you to do anything tonight, no sense borrowing trouble.

Not much more was said that evening. A joke or two, the purport of which was beyond Hanson's comprehension, some lifeless verbal scuffling between two men whose hatred for each other aroused no passion, and some quiet, inconsequential talk about a planned raid on an outlying farmhouse—Hanson got the impression that the ambitions of these men did not extend very far. They were as good as dead already, and most likely knew it. Thinking about things would only make them worse.

Mahoney leaned close and spoke into his ear. "Tomorrow," he said quietly, "I'll need you to take care of a little problem for me." Drawing back, he gave Hanson a sharp look to make sure he understood.

"A'right," Hanson said. Maintaining an outward calm, though his heart was pounding like a jack-hammer. He understood well enough. He had just agreed to kill a man and he didn't even know *who*.

Mahoney blew his breath out noisily. "That's a'right then." He stood briskly, and slapped Hanson on the back. "We sleep in the ruins. Pick yourself out a spot."

He disappeared into the darkness. Several of the others were already gone.

So they had not even bothered to build themselves shelters. Somehow Hanson was not surprised. He scouted out a flat spot in the angle of two ancient walls, and laid out his blanket preparatory to sleep.

The Preacher came stumbling around the corner, stopped, and stood blinking and bewildered. "This is—" he began. "I was—that is, I was sleeping here and I, I—" His mouth opened and closed, gulping against tears.

Disgusted with the little monkey-faced creature, Hanson gathered up his blanket. "Oh, hell," he grumbled. "Take it, if y' want it. I'll

find another spot." He left, sickened by the pathetically grateful expression that flooded the Preacher's face, the moist and worshipful look that came into his eyes.

Hanson was caught in an endless, looping dream when the raid began. He was on the transport again, rolling up and down to the rhythm of life on the roads. It was a long, easy rhythm; it lent itself to a watchful contemplation that was an edge away from sleep, and yet was almost preternaturally alert. There was nothing to mark it but the passage of the sun, rolling up across the arch of sky, under the horizon, up again, and the roads themselves, slipping endlessly under the transport, sometimes paved, sometimes mud, sometimes sun-baked and dusty, the trees along the roadside white with the dust kicked up by the transport, as if they had been hit by a blizzard in the midst of summer. The heat would be rising in waves from the deckplates, shimmering vision. The sky would be dazzlingly blue, and the sun a hot copper penny in it, except when the dust-trail would shift and swirl around the transport itself, and then the sky would become dirty white, and the masked sun would become a smoldering bloodshot eye. Always the endless moving ribbon of the road sliding smoothly toward them, being swallowed by the prow of the transport, with new road always coming into being ahead of them, around the next curve or over the next hill, sliding forward to be swallowed in its turn. And occasionally a hamlet or village, borne up by the current of the road, bobbing nearby for an instant, and then whirled away behind, like a drowsy, peasant-infested, cow-carrying chip of driftwood. He would become aware that he had dreamed this before and then immediately lose all assurance that this was so. So he would anxiously re-live the non-events of traveling the roads, the muted waterfall thunder of the engine, the constant swaying of the transport and the relentless thudding of the treads, the trees, the road, the villages, Willis's grunted orders, Degald's sudden and pointless laughter. Until he forgot what he was worrying about and it all began again.

He awoke to explosions.

Men were shouting, screaming, running. A bullet splintered bark from a tree not five yards from him and there were bright lights and dark shapes beyond the dying embers of the campfire, down the path up which he had come. Savage shouts echoed through the ruins, and another bullet sizzled through the air.

In a panicked instant, Hanson was on his feet, quivering and frozen motionless, like a jack-lighted deer. Somebody slammed into him, cursed, and was gone, along with Hanson's paralysis. He grabbed at his shirt to keep from losing the gun, which he'd carefully stuck between undershirt and belt before turning in. It did not occur to him to use it.

Stumblingly at first, and then faster, he began to run. Men were shouting and crashing into things, running ahead of him, up the path. He followed blindly. Somebody grabbed his arm and he lashed out without looking, his fist smashing into a face. But whoever it was did not let go, but wrapped both arms around his waist.

Turning, he stared down into the Preacher's fearful face.

"Don't!" the Preacher gasped. "For God's sake, don't! That's just what they *want* you to do. They're just beaters. The SIs will be up the trail, waiting. I've seen it before! And politicians—it's a sport to them, ambushing rievers, they get to notch bandits without any risk to themselves. Sometimes they take souvenirs."

The old man's unexpected lucidity broke through the haze of fear and instinct. Hanson stopped and looked around. A flare screamed high into the night. Bright lights, harsh shadows. "What should we do?"

"We've got to get away from the path," the Preacher said. "This way." Tugging at Hanson's arm, he half-pulled him over a pile of crumbling bricks and between two ruined walls. Awkwardly, Hanson let himself be led. Behind them, two SIs stooped over a fallen bandit, machetes in hand, hacking wildly, the blades flashing in the smoky light from the Wall as they rose and fell, rose and fell. One SI looked up and, seeing them, shouted.

They struggled deeper into the darkness.

Together he and the Preacher forced their way through a nightmare of noise-filled woods, stumbling over low walls, ducking under loops of vampire weed and blundering into tangles of mile-a-minute vines, flinching every time a bullet pierced the air with its shrill whine or a phased sonics cannon blanketed the area with an awful split-second of unbearable silence. There was nothing but fear and confusion in Hanson's mind. He'd left his knapsack behind. He had nothing now but his gun and the clothes on his back.

Then the Preacher fell and did not get up.

"Stand, damn you!" Hanson seized the Preacher's shoulder to give him an impatient shake, but his hand came away wet and sticky. He looked at it wonderingly.

Blood.

He stared down at the wrinkled old man, saw the greyness in his bruised face, how the clothes down one side of his body were black with blood. He'd been wounded all along, kept going by hysteria and fear. A flare went up in the air, and doubled shadows from it and the Wall danced in all directions. The little man wasn't going to make it. It was a miracle he'd lasted this long. Hanson couldn't take him along, wherever he was going—it would be useless. The Preacher needed a doctor, and Hanson had no doctoring in him; he could splint a leg or tie a tourniquet, and had several times, back at the factory, but that was it—the kind of gunshot wound the Preacher had was far beyond him. Best to keep moving and let the Preacher fend for himself as best he could, live or die as the gods willed. There was no time now for *sentiment* ...

Cursing himself for a fool even as he did it, Hanson bent down and scooped the little man up in his arms. He was surprisingly heavy.

"They killed an angel in Harrisburg," the Preacher said suddenly. He did not open his eyes. "It's in the records—not that anybody but me ever bothered to read the records ... Used to do that a lot, back then, the angels. Angels passing through the Wall ..."

"Don't talk," Hanson said. He started walking, too tired, too burdened, to run any more. If the SIs caught him, they caught him. It was hard even to care.

But the Preacher went on unheeding. "So close ... I came so very *close*. I was not an inconsequential man ... but I was afraid. Couldn't take those final steps. I had the key to Heaven in me, and I couldn't *go*." He started to weep. "At night, I hear its voice, calling, calling ... it's never *still*. I'm going to die, aren't I?"

Embarrassed, Hanson repeated, "Don't talk."

"Take me to the Wall," the Preacher said, with surprising force. "I want to get that far at least. Bury me there. So I can say I went the distance."

"Yah, sure." Hanson's step was slowing, and the weight of the body in his arms seemed heavy beyond endurance. He didn't think he could go much further. The night, so full of noise for the duration of their

flight, now sank back down into silence, either because of distance or because the SIs and their political masters had finished having their fun and departed.

They came upon an overgrown Utopian road over which meandered a narrow trail, probably not even human-made but rather something created by coyotes or wyverns or thants as they wandered in their dream-sunk and instinctual rounds, and Hanson decided that it could not possibly be the same as the one that passed through the bandit camp. At any rate, safe or not, he was tired of fighting his way through the brush. The woods were preternaturally silent, not so much as a cricket or a knacker stirring. The only sound came from the Wall, a soft humming and buzzing like an infinite swarm of bees heard from a million miles away.

Abruptly, the Preacher gave a shudder and went still in his arms. With a cold seizure of the heart, Hanson knew that he was dead. He stared down at the man, so small, so light, and as he stared, a metal rod burst out of the Preacher's chest, passing through skin and muscle and cloth as if they did not exist, gleaming, quicksilver fast. It bent, unfolded several joints, and then plunged into Hanson.

With a cry of horror, he stumbled back, slapping wildly at his chest with both hands, letting the Preacher's corpse fall to the ground. The rod had already disappeared into him as completely as if it had never been there, sinking out of sight within his chest, leaving no trace of its existence behind.

It was gone.

Hanson was tempted to dismiss the incident, the bizarre *thing* that had leaped out at him like some monstrous Jack-in-the-box and then plunged *into* his body as easily as a hot knife going through butter, dismiss it as a hallucination brought on by fear and fatigue. But he could *feel* it inside him, a heavy weight in his chest that shifted his center of balance and altered his movements in subtle ways. He felt a different man with it in him, estranged from his own body, an exile sitting within the control-cab of his skull, staring horrified and dispassionate out of the eye-sockets. Worse, he could feel the device's desires like a burden of guilt or regret gnawing at the back of his mind. It was anxious to go home, and told him so not in words but in a cold mechanical yearning so intense he felt naked and near-helpless before it.

He stood shivering for a long moment, then bent and picked the Preacher back up again.

The Wall was not far distant, a hundred yards or half a mile, he could not tell. But not far. All the woods around him blazed with its preternatural glow. He walked toward it, impelled by the horror behind him, by the burden in his arms, and by the alien machinery now wrapped around his heart. He could not help himself.

Up close, only a few steps away, closer than he'd ever heard of anyone coming to it, the Wall refused to resolve itself into solid substance. Little flickering motes of intense reddish-pink light swirled and crawled over each other, and the humming sound, though no louder than before, passed right through him; his entire body buzzed and vibrated like the sounding board of a guitar. The Wall loomed so high now that when he craned his head, it seemed to fill the universe, and he had the vertiginous sensation of falling into it. The thing in his chest seemed to leap up with joy.

I won't, he thought wildly. I refuse! But he kept walking. The Wall filled his sight entirely, that terrible, unearthly dazzle. Briefly, he tried to lie to himself, to pretend that he was just going to bring the Preacher to the Wall he had spent his entire life journeying toward without ever reaching, and place his body there before it, like an offering to an angry God, so that He might be moved to pity and forgive His sinning children, especially that one in particular who was named Hanson. But being so close to the Wall seemed to lend the key strength; the buzzing rose up and overwhelmed Hanson's thoughts in a great wave.

A hole opened in the Wall like a mouth, directly before him. It was big enough for a man to walk into. No, he thought. *No!*

He walked in.

The Wall closed behind him. He was in a moving bubble that kept pace with him. The walls provided enough light for him to see by and enough air to breathe. But it was warm, much warmer than the air outside had been. Sweat beaded up on his forehead, ran in rivulets from his armpits. It was ungodly *hot* in here! He kept walking, but more slowly now. His arms ached dreadfully, and his knees were starting to buckle. He cursed his weakness, hefted the Preacher's body, and forced himself forward.

He kept walking straight ahead, until he was sure he should have passed through by now. How thick *was* the Wall anyway? How thick could it possibly *be?* The swarming buzz of microscopic bees made it hard for him to think.

On an impulse, he turned and walked at right angles to his previous path. The bubble tracked him perfectly. So it wasn't guiding him! He returned, as best he could, to his previous path. But he was definitely lost now, somewhere within the reaches of the Wall, and it was growing hotter. His skull buzzed and stuttered, and his breath came in long, shuddering gasps. It was as hot as the inside of an oven. He was surprised that his hair hadn't caught fire.

The Preacher's body grew heavier and heavier. His step faltered, grew slower and slower, as though he were wading through mud. Finally, he stopped, and, groaning, sank to his knees in despair. The buzzing grew louder. He reached out a hand, and where his palm brushed against the glowing substance of the Wall, it suddenly stung like a thousand wasps. He whipped his hand back, and saw that it was all bloody, skin and flesh sliced away where he had brushed it against the Wall. Ignoring the pain, he extended the arm again, gingerly, index finger extended.

As he'd suspected, the second time he didn't have to reach so far. The bubble was closing about him. There must be something he could do to stop its progress, but with the heat and noise increasing unbearably, he could not think what it was. He could not think. He could only sink down over the Preacher's corpse, grateful that his ordeal was almost over, as the bubble dwindled around him and its molten substance wrapped itself about his skin in sudden and searing pain.

Hanson screamed.

He awoke in daylight, lying on his back in a meadow, shaded by an elm tree bearing vivid orange fruit. A gentle breeze touched him. It carried the mingled scents of sandalwood and wintergreen.

A tall, inhumanly thin man in a charcoal grey tunic stood watching over Hanson. He had a kind face. On seeing Hanson awake, he smiled. "Welcome home," he said.

Home? Hanson rolled over and levered himself up on an elbow, and then rose to his feet. He looked around and knew for a certainty that he had passed all the way through the Wall.

Heaven was not as he'd imagined it.

No, that was wrong. Hanson had never been able to imagine *what* Heaven might actually be like. Oh, when he was young, he'd been as free with a crudely ribald speculation as anyone, but as far as what it might be *like* to actually stand in the City of God—

Whatever it was, it wasn't this.

He looked across a vast lawn freckled with occasional pairs of silver dots or circles—gently rolling land that stretched as far as the eye could see, and all well-manicured, trimmed, as if someone were mad enough to mow it all. Not that any man could. It would've taken a hundred mowers, in constant motion, tireless, insanely devoted to their task … He shook his head. There were—*buildings?*—here and there, isolated from each other, immaculate and pointless. A cone larger than any single structure Hanson had ever seen, delicately balanced on its point and canted to one side. A red glass sphere caught in arches of congealed lightning. What could only be a baby's arm magnified a million times, sticking out of the earth, fingers gently moving in a way that was undeniably alive.

It did not look right. Hanson knew there was some *other* way that Heaven should look, though he lacked the ability to put it into words. More beautiful, somehow. More symmetrical, perhaps. It should be bizarre and wonderful and, yes, strange, certainly strange. But not like *this*. Never like this. He turned back to the thin man, who was still waiting patiently on him. "Are you … an angel?"

An urbane, undeniably sympathetic, and self-dismissive gesture. "I am a function. You have been in the lands of the Renunciates for so long a time that you can no longer recall your origins. Until you recover your memory, you may call upon my services as your interface and guide."

"My memory," Hanson said flatly. He could make sense of none of this.

"Your friend is anxious to see you."

He cast his mind back, awkwardly groping for meaning. Anyone who could have been counted a friend of his, by however loose a reckoning, was either long dead or left behind in Orange; he had no friends anymore, not unless you counted the Preacher, and he—"My friend is dead."

"Not any longer."

The Preacher sat in the grass of a nearby hollow, running a finger around and around the inside of his mouth, admiring his perfect new teeth. He smiled broadly at Hanson. "Quite a set of choppers, eh?" Then, indicating the thin man, "Don't pay any mind to Cicero. He's not real."

"He said he was a function."

"It means the same thing. I told him to let you sleep, figured you could use it. Me, I've been up for hours. How do you feel?"

"Fine," Hanson said uncomfortably. He slapped his hands together, and then, as he realized what he'd done, raised them up to his face in wonderment: The places on the palm and the tip of the one finger that the Wall had eaten away had been completely, magically healed. And, now that he thought about it, he really *did,* he felt just fine! A hundred small aches and aggravations were gone, from the sour tooth that had nagged dimly from the back corner of his mouth for as long as he could remember to the thorn scratches and sticker-rashes he'd incurred blundering into the mile-a-minute vines last night—gone, as if they had never been. He rotated his neck and it didn't make the little crackling noises that he had grown accustomed to. Even the gut-pain of the Crab, by God, even *that* was gone! Something moved deep within him, a small and hurtful aching sensation so alien to his nature that it took him a second to identify it.

Hope.

"By God," he breathed. "By God, Preacher, I—"

"Boone!" the little man snapped. "My name is J. Pickett Boone, and don't you forget it!"

Startled, Hanson looked hard at him. There was a clear light in Boone's eyes; the mental confusion of earlier was gone. He held himself like a supervisor now. Not only his body had been healed by his passage into Heaven, it seemed, but his mind as well. And with his new-found clarity of thought must surely have come memories of his association with the outlaw band, and humiliation about the services he had provided them in his long evasion of the Wall. Boone was glaring up at him with a fierce intensity, fists clenched, trembling, like a terrier-dog working itself up to attack a bull. Hanson found that he despised Boone less than before, and, paradoxically, disliked him more.

He dropped his eyes. "Didn't mean anything by it," he mumbled.

For a long, still moment, Boone's face remained closed, tight, hostile. Then he made a curt, dismissive gesture. The balance of power between them had shifted, subtly but surely; immediately, Hanson regretted having let the moment slide by the way he had. But it was too late, no use trying to put the egg back into the shell, what was done was done. The little man stood and stretched and looked searchingly about

him, staring into the middle distance where the grassland rose in great arched ribs, under which birds flew and atop which were trees and grazing deer, and beyond, at the ranges of what were either strange mountains or even stranger buildings. Boone looked upon the bizarre structures of Heaven with shrewd, knowledgeable eyes; they clearly did not seem strange to *him* …

Cicero stood nearby with that blank, alert look of his. Hanson felt oddly reluctant to address his questions to him. Lowering his voice, he said, "Boone, I can't make any sense out of—" he swept a hand to take in everything, the buildings he could make a partial sense of one at a time but could not assemble into a single coherent picture, could not seem to hold in his mind all at the same time—"all this."

"Are you a religious man?" Boone asked.

The question took him aback, it had been so long a time since anybody had asked him anything remotely like it. Religion was not the sort of thing a man like him was expected to have an opinion on. "I don't think so."

"Then maybe there's some slight chance of your understanding." The little man spoke in a fussy, professorial manner, falling back to the rhythms and cadences of his long-forgotten former life. "Hanson, the City of God isn't any such thing. Got that? It's not inhabited by gods or angels or anything of the sort, but by people. People like you and me."

"Uh …"

"Did you ever try to imagine what it was like to live in the time of the Utopians?"

"Well—yeah. Sure. A little, sometimes."

"Not exactly easy, was it? Once you got past having all the food and clean water you ever wanted, good clothes, a soft bed, and never having to do sweat-work again in your life, could you picture exactly what you'd be *doing* with all that wealth, all those machines, how it would feel to be a Utopian?"

Hanson shook his head.

"Well, all that—the clean water, the limitless food, the ease and comfort, heat in the winter and cool breezes in the summer that squirt out of a machine at the twist of a knob—was just the *beginning*. Wealth creates wealth and knowledge builds upon knowledge. During the era of the Utopians, knowledge went into a period of exponential increase,

and, in one grand surge—from my researches, I have reason to believe it happened within the span of a single human lifetime—people gained control of such immense powers and such total freedoms that … well, it *changed* them. The people who resulted from this change—let's call them the post-Utopians—would have been as incomprehensible to the Utopians as the Utopians are to us. They have wealth and power beyond your craziest dreams. Far beyond anything you even *can* imagine. They are like gods in their power, and yet they're not gods. They are only post-Utopians. Remember that. They're just people with all the technology, all the wealth, all the power anyone could ever want."

Hanson could follow what Boone was saying. He could even understand it. But somehow he could not fit his head around it, could not encompass it, could not feel and accept the truth of it. It was all too strange. He struggled to put into words some reason why he could not entirely accept it. "But—" he began.

He stopped, swallowed, tried again.

"But then—why the Wall?"

"I don't know." Boone began walking and Hanson had no choice but to follow. Cicero trailed after them like an obliging shadow.

"Let's ask them."

Not many paces distant were two silver metal plates, each roughly ten feet in diameter. With no particular emphasis, Boone strolled onto one. Hanson and Cicero followed.

Something like a twisty silver pillar, a metal cyclone, shot up from the other plate into the air, disappeared into the clouds, and then with a mad looping motion came rushing down upon them. Cicero's hand squeezed Hanson's shoulder reassuringly. "Wait." He heard the word but could not parse its meaning, could not even attempt to run, could do nothing in fact but stand rooted where he was in horror. The crazy thought flitted through his head that now he knew how a mouse felt just before being stepped on by an horse, and then the cyclone slammed down upon them.

He blinked, and the pillar was gone.

Everything around him had changed. He was standing before a grove of orange-roofed mansions—palaces, almost—all raised high above the ground on impossibly thin stilts. For a giddy instant he thought they were floating, and then, when he realized the truth, feared the stilts would snap and send these massive structures smashing down upon him.

A great sphere of water hung over the stilted buildings, dwarfing them. What light came through it was wan and diminished, bathing the buildings in a wavering shadowy cool, as if they were under the sea.

"There." Cicero pointed to a balcony, high above them. "A typical dwelling, selected, as you requested, to be as like those you are familiar with as possible. This one is in the Italianate style." After a brief hesitation, Boone nodded. The silver-grey cyclone leaped up and slammed down upon them again, and they were standing on the balcony.

Hanson craned his head and stared up into the water. From here, the sphere was obviously not solid, but a bubble with walls mere yards deep, wrapped around a core of nothing. A shark swam by overhead, twisting its head from side to side, mouth opening and closing in little gasps.

A salt breeze wafted down from the bubble. Multicolored ribbons twisted and curled in the air between buildings and were gone. Staring out at a hundred other balconies, all empty, Hanson felt a sourceless, aching loneliness growing within him, the sort of emptiness one might feel in an abandoned city, an animal certainty that he was surrounded by nothing but vacancy and isolation.

"Where is everybody?" he asked.

Cicero looked regretful. "Gone."

"Gone where?"

"Elsewhere."

"I don't understand."

"They have followed … certain trends to their inevitable conclusion," Cicero said. "Would you like to go inside now?"

Boone hesitated, irresolute. "Well, as long as we're here, we might as well take a look."

Cicero walked forward, and the wall parted for him. Boone ducked after.

Hanson had no choice but to follow.

He found himself in a clean, light-filled space. The ceiling was high, the pillars thin, and the leaded-glass windows opalescent. It was a fairy-tale structure, sculpted of moonlight and mist, of soft evening shadows and ice. Even standing within it he couldn't quite bring himself to believe in its existence. It was too fine, too delicate. Hanson could not think back to a time when he'd been young enough to believe

in such a place. Yet—here it was. It made him feel gross and crude by contrast, hairy and smelly as a troll, unworthy.

While he was gawking, Boone had been asking questions. Cicero was explaining to him how the cyclones worked. "—rotating you thirty-seven degrees in time, which is why it feels instantaneous; in actuality your rest-motion is only a few thousand kilometers per hour." Boone nodded, frowning with concentration and understanding. "Similarly, this doorway is distributed in probability along a curve of thirty-nine thousand miles, so that ..."

He led them into a room with enormous windows.

Entering, Hanson seemed to grow lighter, his movements unnaturally slow, like those of a man underwater, his head giddy with uncertainty, so that it seemed almost as if he had to push his foot down to bring it to the floor at the end of each step. Otherwise, it would've simply floated up and up, leaving him treading air.

"Where are—" Hanson began, and, somehow placing his feet badly, went tumbling over backwards, his balance all *wrong*, damnit, falling with impossible slowness and thrashing awkwardly as the floor came floating up toward him.

Cicero reached over to catch and steady him. "I could increase the local gravity gradient, if you wish," he said, but whatever his offer might entail, it meant nothing at all to Hanson. Boone hid an amused smile.

Flushing, Hanson looked away, through the windows.

Glorious and terrifying views! A bright grey-and-white wasteland of rocks and sand, and, in the distance, a range of humped and rounded mountains. Long black shadows stretching toward forever under the blackest of skies.

The bleached skeleton of a giraffe lay on the barren soil just outside the window.

Low over the mountains hung ... something. Something round and blue and streaked with white, as distant as the Moon, but far larger than the Moon ever was.

It was the Earth. Hanson recognized it from the faded Utopian pictures that were preserved in the Courthouse back in Orange, and which a disbelieving bailiff apathetically pointed out to disbelieving visitors as proof that human beings had once, long ago, left the surface of the Earth. This looked just like those pictures, only far more vivid.

The colors were unimaginably brighter, the oceans the wildest blue, the clouds dazzling!

It was unbearable.

Hanson twisted wildly away, went tumbling, and more by luck than not, grabbed the doorway with one rough hand. All in a single surge of panic, he pulled himself through and back into the first room. For a long moment, he knelt there, eyes clenched tight. Madness! How could Boone stand it? After a minute or two he gathered himself together and spoke to the backs of the other two:

"I'm going outside. Just for a minute."

They were lost in talk. Neither of them responded.

He went outside, and it was afternoon. Only a minute before, when he had entered the room, it had been morning. But there was no mistaking it—the sun, wan and silvery through the water-bubble, had risen higher, the stilted shadows of the buildings had grown longer. He had lost hours, somehow.

Weakly, Hanson leaned against the balustrade, staring not up at the marine animals or out at the bizarrely-contoured horizon, but into empty space, at nothing. A tangle of colored ribbons floated in the air, twisting between buildings, a whimsical carnival brightness, and when part of it drifted by him, he reached up impulsively to touch it. One ribbon playfully wrapped itself about his wrist like a tendril, and he found himself standing on a balcony on the building opposite staring into his own startled eyes. He was in both places simultaneously, and then in a third on an entirely different building, staring out into the fields of Heaven where something like a shark's fin—triangular, dark, immense—lifted up from the grass and slowly subsided. All three Hansons were aware of the others' thoughts, but their thoughts were not identical but divergent, different in the qualities of their fear and dismay.

The ribbon released his wrist, and he was one and alone again.

He lurched back from the balustrade and across one of the silver plates. A cyclone slammed down on him.

Then off.

When Hanson stumbled from the plate, he found himself in a windblown hall. Down its center, unsupported, hung a line of vast stone bells. They were as grey and rough-looking as granite, but when he wonderingly reached up a finger to touch one, it *boomed* as if struck by

a maul, a deep and despairing vibration that shook his body like the sound of God sobbing.

"Naw." He stepped back from the bell, shaking his head, profoundly disturbed by something he could not put a name to. "Not like that. Naw, not like—that."

At the far end of the hall was another pair of circles—more cyclone plates. He hurried toward them, shamblingly at first, then faster. The all but imperceptible breeze of his passage brushing against the bells set up an echoing clamor, a turbulent ocean of sound that surged and swelled about him, filling him with primal dread, driving him to greater speed, so that when he reached the plate he was practically running. His feet touched one circle. A metal pillar rose from the other and slammed down upon him.

Silence.

He was in a room full of shadows and jumbled shapes. Something shifted slightly to one side. There were other furtive movements to the other side, up ahead, just behind. With a start, Hanson realized that he was not alone. The room was filled with prowling animals, great cats the size of cougars. There was painfully little light, but they had, he thought, human faces, and they spoke with the voices of women.

"Oh baby," one murmured, "let me rip you open."

"My fangs are long," said another.

"My claws are sharp."

"My breasts are heavy with milk."

They prowled one over the other, haunches high in the darkness, too many, the light too dim, for Hanson to determine their number. Their eyes and teeth flashed in the gloom. They were in constant motion, slinking, stalking.

"See my long pink tongue."

"Smell my hindquarters."

"Imagine my teeth piercing your lips, tearing the flesh off of your face."

"I'll make sure you suffer a long, long time."

"Oh, honey."

Their voices overlapped in a kind of moaning chorus. Their eyes materialized and disappeared behind flirtatious lashes.

"Poor baby. It's been so long since you experienced anything with intensity."

"*We'll* make you feel something."

"I'll pull out your intestines an inch at a time—slowly, slowly."

It was terrifying. It was too much. Hanson found himself pulling in upon himself, wrapping arms about his body, shivering. It wasn't fair! He didn't know any of the rules here, any of the assumptions. *Cicero,* he thought. If only Cicero were here, he'd know what to do.

"It's all right," Cicero said. "I'm here." He strode through the cat-women as if either he or they were not entirely real, completely ignored by them all. "If you'll look down, you'll see a set of parallel lines glowing faintly on the floor. They mark a safe passage from the one plate to the other. So long as you stay between them, you're perfectly safe."

He took Hanson's arm, led him across the room.

Wobbly, Hanson allowed himself to be led. "How did you find me?" he asked. "How did you know I—?" He stopped, unable to finish the sentence.

"I am a function."

"Oh." The cat-women paced him, musky-smelling and avid-faced. Growling their lust. Ignoring them as best he could, Hanson asked, "Why? Why would anybody want—" He swept out an arm to encompass them all. "*—this?*"

"You have been a long time away indeed," Cicero said, "to have forgotten the need for such entertainments."

They stepped on the plate—

—a grove of slim buildings so tall that the rivers of water falling from their fluted tops dissolved into rainbows and mist long before they could reach the ground.

—a stone cathedral floating within a sad brown sunset, that stared at him with a hundred human eyes.

—a twilight plane where armies of metal giants fought with axes and clubs, while small and tireless servitor machines retrieved the scrap and climbed their sides to rebuild the damaged parts.

—a small room smelling of chickens and new-mown hay, where blue flames flickered over revolving bowls of mercury.

—a tangle of snakes that raised agonized heads as large as houses against a steel-plate sky.

—an incandescent mushroom cloud, strangely still and unchanging, like a snapshot of some catastrophic explosion, a frozen instant of horrified time.

The light and heat from this last were excruciating. Hanson threw a hand over his watering eyes, his stinging face, and cried, "Where are we going?"

"Why, wherever you want," Cicero said. "We have been traveling at random, while I awaited your directions."

"Then take me home."

Cicero smiled encouragingly. "And where is that?"

It was as if one of the cat-women had arisen out of nowhere to present him with a riddle encompassing the purpose and end of human life. Hanson's mind was blank; for a long moment he could think of no possible destination to offer in response. Then, "Boone," he said finally. "Take me back to Boone."

There was a light dusting of yellow pollen on the balcony, and a spring-like coolness to the air. Cicero gestured Hanson through a doorway and into an unfamiliar room. The walls were lined with dark wood paneling and shelves of leather-bound books. Squares and scrolls hung unsupported in the air, a dozen or more, some bright with moving images, others filled with cryptic text. Boone looked up from a writing desk, and, with a wild cry, stood. Papers scattered from him like birds. He ran through the squares and scrolls as if they did not exist, and hugged Hanson with all his strength.

"Aw, now," Hanson muttered in confusion. "C'mon, now." Embarrassed, he patted the man's back once, twice, feather-light and reluctant touches.

Boone stepped back, smiling through his tears. "Where the hell have you *been?* I stayed here, made this my camp, hoping against hope that you'd—well, that hardly matters. You're back now, that's all that matters. Only—where have you *been?*"

"I was—" Hanson spread his hands and looked down into them helplessly as if they might contain an answer that was nowhere else to be found. He did not know where he had been. "I think I found some post-Utopians." Boone started and shot him an odd look. "They were ... strange. Like cats."

"Those were not citizens," Cicero corrected gently. "They were a function. Like me."

"Oh, shut up." Boone wiped away his tears and put his hands on his hips. He glared up at Hanson, who, abruptly and with an odd sense of dislocation, realized that he had somehow acquired a mustache and a

trim little goatee. "I suppose you think that was funny? I suppose you think you can just follow whatever damn-fool notion enters your head? Well, I have news for *you*. From this moment on, you're not going anywhere without my express permission. You got that? I don't want you going to the shithouse to jerk off without telling me first."

Hanson flushed. His muscles bunched and knotted under the lash of Boone's words. He felt that all-too-familiar burning sensation at the back of his throat, the bitter fire of resentment forcibly suppressed. He could crush the little man in his bare hands, if he wanted to, and you'd think that Boone would by God respect that, would at least grant him the elementary caution one gave a manshogger or factory machine with a known history of mangling its operators. It griped him that he did not.

But he needed Boone, and they both knew it. The City of God was comprehensible to Boone in ways it was *not* to Hanson; he needed the little man's direction and guidance. Ducking his head, he felt the old habits of submission, of obedience, of silence, the reflexive knuckling under to the loudest voice, come over him like an old, heavy, and detested coat. "It was only a little while."

"A little while! Eight *months* you were gone, and you call it—" Boone's voice rose sarcastically "—a little while?"

Hanson lifted his hands, palms up, baffled. "Eight months? But—" Boone silenced him with a look. And though he was trying to hide it, there was less anger than fear in that look: fear and loneliness. Eight months Boone had spent by himself, without human company, enduring an isolation that would be a burden for even the strongest man, and would break or even kill the weak; the gods alone knew what he'd been through, or how he had withstood it.

For long minutes, Boone simply stared at him, as if afraid he was about to turn away and stalk off once more. Then, stooping, he began to gather up his papers. "These are my notes," he said. "Oh, nothing formal, you understand. Just jottings, really. I spent the winter researching the City's records. If you want to call them that. There's enough information available here to drown in, but none of it's organized at all usefully, nothing is presented in any kind of—well, never mind." He passed a hand over his eyes, wiping them clean of tears.

"You've moved," Hanson said.

"Eh? What? Nothing of the sort!"

"The room I saw before had pillars. And windows ..."

Boone made a dismissive gesture. "Bah! It takes nothing to reconfigure a room. You have no idea the kind of wealth that's fallen into our hands. And power—power *unimaginable* in our old lives!" Papers gathered, he stood behind his desk, tamping them into a neat stack, and, with that simple gesture, regained all of his lost authority. "But this must be bewildering to you. How to explain? Where to begin?"

He thought for a moment.

"I was wrong," Boone said. "Remember when I told you the post-Utopians were people like you and me? I was wrong. I've opened windows into their lives and ... they were *different*. Different in ways that made them not even remotely human. I think they destroyed themselves, but I'm not sure."

"Destroyed themselves? You mean, like—suicide?"

"Possible—barely. Burned themselves out, more likely. *Transfigured* themselves, perhaps. Indications go both ways. Let me replay for you a conversation you have doubtless long forgotten." With a wave of his hand, Boone swept the squares and scrolls to either side, leaving one, bright as a window, hanging in the center of the room. Through it, Hanson saw the balcony outside and, upon it, Cicero talking to a hulking brute of a man.

"Where is everybody?" the big man asked.

(Startled, Hanson realized it was himself.)

"Gone."

"Gone where?"

"Elsewhere."

"I don't understand."

"They have followed ... certain trends to their inevitable consequences."

Boone gestured brusquely, waving the scroll out of existence. "Such things I have discovered. You cannot imagine. Fantastic, incredible things! I've tasted in surrogate the ineffable pleasures the post-Utopians discovered for themselves, glimpsed darkly, as if through a scrim, their activities and preoccupations. Oh, I am not a scholar for nothing! But where have the post-Utopians *gone?* What became of them? In this one crucial respect, I am as ignorant as you." He turned to Cicero: "Let me ask you again: Where have they gone?"

"Elsewhere."

"Where elsewhere?"

"You would not understand."

"Are they dead?"

"No."

"Will they ever come back?"

"They never went away."

"The hell with you!" To this point the exchange had proceeded with the lifeless quality of a catechism, a rote repetition of questions and answers unvarying and long committed to memory. But now Boone stood, and, hands behind his back, savagely strode to and fro, as if building up his courage. There was a wild light in his eyes. Finally he asked, "Will we see them again in recognizable form—as something roughly human, capable of communicating and interacting with us?"

"By the nature of what happened," Cicero said, "that cannot be."

"You see?" Boone turned triumphantly to Hanson. "You *see?* The City of God—its buildings and parks, its powers and potentials, the land, the sea, everything—is *ours*. Ours to control, ours to command. It belongs to *us!*"

Hanson glanced uneasily at Cicero.

Cicero said nothing, waited patiently.

"I dunno," Hanson said. It didn't seem *right* to him, somehow, to make such claims. It didn't seem safe. In his experience, everything had a price, even things you didn't get, and that price was always more than any sane man would agree to pay, given the choice. Not that you ever *got* the choice. The balance was enforced from afar, by powers immaterial and unlocatable, nothing you could even identify, much less get your hands on. "Maybe we oughta just take our time here, not do anything rash."

"No! I've waited too long. Your coming back now is a *sign*. We have to act immediately, right now, without delay." With a slash of one hand, Boone made all the scrolls and squares disappear. The room looked monkishly bare without them. Turning to Cicero, he said, "Take us to the Throne of God."

"The local utility node, you mean?"

"Whatever you want to call it—bring us there."

Cicero nodded. "As you wish."

The Throne was located in a windowless zone like a jet bead atop a slanted glass tower whose stairs took them a terrifying half-hour to climb. From a distance, the tower looked like a syringe with a black drop of blood at its tip. Within, the walls and stairs alike were transparent, marked only by gleams of reflected and refracted light, making the ascent a sickeningly vertiginous experience. There was no other way to reach it, Cicero explained, because the powers it controlled were too great to be tapped on a whim, even a post-Utopian's whim. At the top, within a hideously unstable region of blackness, they confronted the thing itself—an unornamented silver chair with arm-rests and a high back.

Boone had been here before.

"Control," Boone said. "Even the City of God needs be controlled. *Especially* the City of God." He paced back and forth before the Throne, talking rapidly and with an unnatural energy. "There are many such towers, each tapping a fraction of the power of the Wall and responsible for the maintenance of a small segment of the lands within. From this chair, one man can control more power than is held by all the mortal nations combined. I have often come here to meditate upon whether to assume responsibility for that power."

"Don't!" Hanson said suddenly. He couldn't explain the wave of apprehension that came over him, the fearful certainty that Boone was about to destroy them both; but he felt it nevertheless, down to the soles of his feet. "Just—don't *do* it!"

Boone nodded, not listening. He stopped pacing and struck a pose, hands behind back, legs wide. "Hanson, we stand on the brink of history. It is our duty to humanity—our destiny, even—to tear down the Wall separating the Human Domain from the City of God." He stared at the Throne without seeming to actually see it, his eyes gleaming and blank with excitement.

"Think of it, Hanson! For ages, we have been made helpless, impoverished by the presence of a City whose accomplishments we could never hope to duplicate, whose very existence made a mockery of all our aspirations. Now ... now, we can make the Earth a garden, abolish human misery, free men to follow their better natures. We'll fill the skies and roads with great vessels again, millions of them! We'll build cities—*human* cities!—on the Moon, beneath the seas, at the poles. Can you *picture* it, Hanson?"

Hanson dumbly shook his head.

Boone laughed, a shallow, brittle laugh. "No. No, of course you can't. But you'll see—you'll *see*." He took a step toward the Throne, then convulsively whirled about, and, hugging himself, said, "It is a great responsibility I am assuming here, a terrible burden indeed. You see that, don't you? By its very nature power must be apportioned, divided, distributed—and withheld. That is natural law. Fanatics and opportunists, the self-serving and corrupt, will be drawn to this point like moths to the flame. We must take steps to ensure that this power does not fall into the wrong hands."

In all the crawling and uneasy blackness, the silver Throne was an island of calm matter. Not even aware he was doing it, Hanson stretched out a hand to touch it, to reassure himself with the cool feel of its solidity.

"Don't!" Boone said. "Only *I* can touch the throne—it's protected."

Hanson whipped his hand away. He had been intending, once Boone stopped talking, to urge him one more time not to do this thing. But now, overcome with futility, he knew he would not. What would be the use? A man like Boone, smart as he was, would never listen to somebody like *him*. And why *should* he? He was nothing much in the brains department, he knew it—never had been. Look at the mess he'd made of his life, look at how, all the way along the line, it had been someone *else*—Gossard, Willis, Boone—who had saved him from the consequences of his own stupid, blundering actions. Without them, he never would have made it. Without them, he never would have been standing here in the first place, way up here above the City of God, at the place where all the power of Heaven could be commanded. Without them, he'd be a pile of weathering bones somewhere, already stripped of flesh, already forgotten.

Hanson felt himself flushing with shame, suffused with a dull, ponderous embarrassment that seemed to turn his limbs to lead, congeal him solid where he stood, incapable of speech or action. He was a proud man—pride was what had gotten him into all this in the *first* place, after all. That is, he was a proud man when he had something to be proud *about* ... but it seemed like he hadn't had that for a very long time. Certainly there was nothing to be proud about now, even though he was standing where no man had stood for who knew how many thousands of years. He'd gotten here in the first place through sheer blind

blundering luck, and by taking advantage of the sharper wits of other men, and now that he was *here,* he really only half-understood the situation, or what Boone was proposing to do, or the risks involved, or the rewards that might be gleaned. Even standing here before the Throne of God, even with all the strange and wondrous things that he'd been through, he hadn't been changed or elevated or ennobled—he was still just the common working slob he'd always been. Just a dumb ox. So why should he interfere? What right did *he* have to an opinion?

Keep your mouth shut, then, ox, he told himself bitterly. Let the smart men decide how to run the world. Just as you always have.

But, even with all of that running in his head, he couldn't help but feel a chill slice through him when Boone stepped up to the Throne. His mouth had gone dry with fear, and, when Boone reached forth a hand and actually *touched* the Throne, lightly, caressingly, Hanson felt the small hairs along his spine and on the back of his neck stir and stand up, one by one by one.

"I still don't think you should do this," Hanson said, in spite of himself, unable to keep the terror out of his voice.

"Don't worry," Boone said distractedly. "It's perfectly safe—for *me*." For a long still moment, he made no sound, and then he shook himself, gathering all his will and purpose. "Well," said Boone. "Here it is, then, the moment when History turns, when Mankind's destiny awakes from its long slumber!" He hovered over the Throne a moment, unable to work up the nerve to sit down and unwilling to retreat. "Now!"

He sat.

Grinning nervously, Boone gripped the arm-rests of the Throne. He took a deep breath. "This is a historic moment," he told Hanson. "Impress it on your memory. Forget nothing!"

Then he nodded to Cicero. "I am ready."

"As you will."

Five long needles of light converged upon Boone, piercing his skull.

"Ah!" he cried.

He stiffened, rising up slightly, and was silent.

For a long time, the little man sat wordlessly, staring straight ahead of himself, so far as Hanson could determine, into nothing. "Boone …" He reached out a tentative hand, and then, as Boone's wild eyes flicked in his direction, withdrew it. "Are you all right?"

Boone said nothing.

To Cicero, Hanson repeated, "Is he all right?"

"That is a difficult question to answer simply."

Abruptly Boone raised a hand. "Watch *this!*" The shifting blackness surrounding them transformed itself, so that they were staring across great reaches of the City of God. He pointed past a range of fang-thin pyramids (or maybe they were patterned neon stalagmites, high as skyscrapers—there was no way for Hanson to tell) to a park-like region where a flock of flamingos clustered like great masses of scarlet flowers at the edge of a shallow lake. Then he made his hand into a fist.

At Boone's gesture, the lake exploded upward. Water shot skywards, and, geysering, froze into a hollow lattice-work tube of ice that twisted and glittered wildly in the sun. Through the mist thrown out by the fantastic exchange of temperatures, Hanson saw the charred bodies of the flamingos falling like cinders.

"Do you know how much energy it took to do that? Fabulous amounts! More energy than was deployed by one of the nuclear weapons of antiquity. Oh, I wish you had the math to understand! It would stagger you to work out the figures!"

Staring at the blue-ice spire, all twisty and interwoven angles through a fog so dazzlingly bright he winced to look upon it, Hanson felt his mouth go dry. He swallowed hard and said, "What—what's it for?"

"For?" Boone laughed like a child. "For no reason at all! For the joy of the thing! Because I *felt* like it. I made it, and I can unmake it, if I wish, just like—that!"

He snapped his fingers.

The construction shattered. And even as the great shards were falling, Boone gestured again, the darkness re-forming around them, so that they were snug in the tiny room again.

"Now," Boone said, suddenly businesslike. "We must make plans. First, the Wall will have to come down. No question about that. But those who wish to benefit from my accomplishment must be brought to heel. I *know* them, you see. Oh, yes, I know their type! They will brush us aside with a pat on the head and a warning not to meddle, if they can; force is their all. They must be taught *respect.*" He closed his eyes, thinking. "An object lesson, perhaps?" Then, offhandedly. "You can have my old rooms if you wish, Hanson. I think they'd suit you."

"You're … you're planning to live *here?*" Hanson said in horrified disbelief, staring about at the formless, crawling void that surrounded them.

Boone's eyes snapped open. "What? Of *course* I am! This room is the nexus, the focal point—anything I want can be brought to me here. Food. Books." With an oddly defiant toss of his head, he added, "Women."

Hanson twisted his mouth sourly. He understood well enough what was going on here, for he'd seen it happen before. Dumb as he might be, he wasn't so stupid he couldn't smell shit when somebody pushed his nose into it. Boone was turning himself into a *boss.* Seemed you couldn't get rid of them. Kill all the bosses, and the quiet guy who'd worked alongside you all his life and never once did anybody dirt would step forward to fill the vacancy and become a boss himself, and next thing you knew you were eating dust at *his* feet, right back where you'd always been. Nothing ever changed; it seemed like nothing ever really *could* change. He clenched and unclenched his fists in helpless and baffled anger.

"First, though—the Wall." Boone lifted his arms grandly.

The blackness before him bulged.

"What—?" Boone began.

A fierce and armless man strode up to the Throne, as stern and beautiful as an angel. His robes were afire, burning continuously without being destroyed. The smell of roasting flesh was nauseating. He frowned down upon Boone with blinded eyes whose sockets were encrusted with dried blood.

"My proud brother," the phantom said. "You have returned."

Boone's eyes widened in astonishment for the briefest of instants, then narrowed again, shrewdly. "I'm not your brother."

"You are a Renunciate. It is the same thing."

"I don't know what that means."

"It means you are human," Cicero said mildly, "of the race which built the City, but one of those who, given the opportunity to enter it, turned away."

Carefully, Boone said, "I am a post-Utopian—a citizen. You cannot question my authority." He slapped his chest. "I hold the key within me."

"You are no citizen!" The phantom pointed sternly at Hanson. "*He* is a citizen. *He* holds the key to the City within him. You are

allowed in the City only as his property. But even as his property, you have gone too far!"

It was the briefest of looks Boone threw Hanson, but one that spoke eloquently of hurt and betrayal, a look that pierced Hanson to the core of his being, that made him want to throw up his hands and protest his innocence. I didn't mean to do it, he wanted to cry. The key left you for me when you died. It wasn't *my* idea! If I'd known it was important—

But Boone, ever pragmatic, had already turned back to argue with his opponent. "Damnit, you can't condemn me for something I never *did*. I'm not one of your ancient enemies. Those who refused to enter the City with you are dead long ages ago. *I* didn't make that decision. I would have chosen differently."

"No matter! You are a Renunciate. The sin is in the seed. Time cannot expunge it. Your kind shirked the peril, the challenge, the transforming glory and horror, and for what purpose? In order to cling to your humanity! Your betrayal is not forgotten and can never be forgiven. It is too late for regrets."

"Listen!" Boone cried. "Those issues that divided your kind and mine are long dead. Yes, we were separated—let now the two streams reunite! It's time we were reconciled."

A short, angry slash of the head. "No!" The phantom's face was dark as thunder. "Too late, too late!"

"It's never too late!"

"It was *always* too late for you." Now the flames blazed hotter, so that the apparition became almost painfully bright, dazzling and terrible. "Look—see the price we paid for perfection!"

Briefly, Hanson saw the raw and bleeding wound where the man's genitals had been. He turned his head away, sickened.

"I tore off those parts with my own teeth and, oh, how I savored the pain of it! Could *you* have done as much?"

Boone could not speak.

The phantom smiled disdainfully as the flames burned low again. "I thought not. You came here seeking power and knowledge. Very well. Drink deep of both. Learn what we learned!"

Boone screamed.

It hurt the eye to look at him. He seemed to be vibrating; a kind of still motion possessed him, as if he were simultaneously shooting

rapidly upward in the air and descending with equal speed into the ground. And yet he went nowhere. Boone's body had taken on the blurriness of extreme speed, a sort of translucence with nothing visible behind it. His face tensed, stretched, lengthened like cold taffy relentlessly pulled. His mouth stayed open, stretched to its extreme.

He screamed.

He screamed, and the scream went on and on, independent of the air in his lungs, endless, eternal, a condition of existence, a cry of pain and fear that stretched from the beginning of time to its end, like the shrill note of a violin string endlessly stroked, always on the verge of snapping and yet continuing, impossibly continuing. It simply *was*.

Hanson seized Cicero by the shoulders and shook him. "We'll leave!" he cried. "Tell *him*," pointing to the phantom, "to let Boone go, and we'll leave. Tell him!"

"He cannot be reasoned with. Despite his appearance, despite his words, he is not a citizen. He is only a security function."

Hanson spun away, reaching for Boone, but Cicero stopped his hand. Slight though he was, Cicero was impossibly strong; Hanson, for all his muscle and bulk, could not free himself from his grip. "It would be extremely dangerous to touch him. It might kill you."

"You!" Hanson shouted to the phantom. "*You* can stop this!"

The phantom turned his sightless frown upon Hanson, but said nothing.

Now the air about Boone was streaking, congealing into vertical strings of shattered light, greenish, as if the vibrations from the Throne were threatening the structure and nature of space about it. Boone hung agonized at the very center of this twisting chaos. His eyes were wide with pain, but sane. Unbearably sane.

His scream went on and on, unendurable.

"Cicero!" Hanson cried again. "He's dying!"

"No. He is suffering, but he will not die. He will not be *allowed* to die. He will wait here as a warning to all who would aspire beyond their state. The years will pass, and then the decades, and then the centuries. To him, the agony will be eternal."

"Get him off, damn you!"

"He is beyond rescue. The security function is implacable and absolute. A Renunciate has sat upon the Throne—he must be punished."

As if in a dream, Hanson felt his hands go to his belt. His gun was still there—the gun he had retained simply because it was the only thing besides Boone that he had brought with him to the City of God, the only thing he possessed that was undeniably his own.

He pulled it out.

This was not him acting; it was his body, obeying no conscious impulse of his own, but only the implacable logic of Boone's unending scream. Hanson watched, horrified, from a place behind his eyes as the gun swam into view. He expected Cicero to step forward to stop him. He expected the guardian function to confront him.

Neither did.

Awkwardly he slid the safety to off. He cocked back the heavy hammer. He raised the muzzle toward the blind-eyed guardian brooding over Boone's suffering. But when he did, the guardian turned upon him so unconcerned and disdainful an expression that Hanson knew without being told that it was useless, that mere bullets could not stop so powerful a being.

Stepping close to the Throne he raised the gun in both hands, so that it pointed right at the center of Boone's face, at a spot directly between the man's eyes. The agonized eyes that did not look at the gun but right through it, as if it hardly existed and certainly didn't matter, boring into Hanson's eyes and pleading as clearly as words ever did:

Kill me.

I can't, he thought, even as his finger clenched around the trigger, squeezing it tight, fighting the balky mechanism of its action, a simple movement that was taking forever it seemed, impossible that it could go on so long, as if time had frozen to a gelid flurry, slowed, solidified, and then—finally—stopped.

The gun fired, with an appalling explosion of sound so loud it seemed to shatter Hanson's ears.

All in an instant, Hanson's hands went flying up and back, the recoil spinning the revolver itself through the air and sending it clattering across the floor. Boone's head slammed back into the Throne and bounced forward again. Flecks of blood and gore were everywhere, tiny droplets landing on Hanson's knuckles, his shirt front, his face. Boone's body pitched forward and fell heavily to the floor, face-down, as limp as a sack of laundry.

Silence.

The guardian turned to Hanson.

"You may assume control of the node now, if you wish."

Hanson raised his head, heavy with guilt, wordless with disbelief.

"It's true," Cicero said. "There's no danger to you. I know you believe yourself to be a Renunciate, but by testimony of the key you carry within yourself, you are not. You are a citizen. All functions must respect you. The security function would never offer you harm, not even to save the City itself."

Hanson shook his head bullishly, a rejection not so much of any specific words or actions as of everything: Boone's death, the raid on the brigand camp, his flight from Orange, the Pit, his childhood, his birth, *everything.*

With a respectful nod, the security function stepped backward, dissolving into blackness.

"Shall I clear this away?" Cicero indicated Boone's body.

Appalled, Hanson opened his mouth to say who knew what, and then caught control of himself and closed it again. Cicero didn't know any better—he was only a function. He wasn't real. Hanson slumped, closing his eyes. "Yes," he said. "Yes. Take it away, bury it."

"And this?"

Cicero held up the gun.

"Bury it along with him."

Then, because Boone had after all been a man of the cloth, he added. "Raise a stone or a sun-cross or something over it. Something appropriate." It was a hell of a thing for a man to die so far from home. A hell of a thing to pass unnoticed and unremarked by anyone you ever knew.

He stood waiting while Cicero picked up the body in his arms, stepped into darkness, and returned unencumbered. Then he said, "Let's get out of here."

Cicero led him to the stairwell. When he looked down it, he threw up.

What Hanson needed now, more than anything, was sleep. He was still standing, and that was all. Months might have gone by for Boone and Cicero, but for him, Hanson, by the clock of his heart, it had only been three days since he'd had his shoveling contest with the New Man back in the Pit in Orange. In fact, this was *still* the third evening, as far

as he was concerned, although enough had happened in those three days to make it seem like a lifetime had passed, and in all that time he'd only had a fitful nap here and there, not really a decent night's sleep since leaving Orange. He was tired enough to make him believe that he had been awake and on his feet for every second of those eight months that Boone claimed had passed. Every cell in his body yearned for nothingness, darkness, oblivion.

At his direction, Cicero led him back to the spider-legged houses and into Boone's bedroom. It was spare and almost empty, with a small rectangular pad in its center, not much different from a working-class man's futon back in Orange. "Lie here," Cicero said, "and you will be refreshed."

With a nod, Hanson lay down on the pad. It was of an almost neutral texture, neither soft nor hard, just yielding enough to avoid discomfort, a trifle cool to the touch at first and then warm. He closed his eyes.

Five minutes later he opened them again.

He was wide awake.

Lying on the pad had refreshed his body, cleansed it of fatigue poisons, and returned it to peak strength and vigor. Physically he was in terrific shape. Mentally, however, he felt the same as before—wasted, blasted, sick to the very pit of his being with the mere fact of existence.

He sat up, alert, unblinking, and knew then with an awful clarity that he was never going to be able to make any kind of life for himself here, that Heaven was simply not for the likes of him. He didn't know where home was for him anymore—perhaps there *was* no home for him anymore. But, wherever it was, it wasn't *here*.

He stood.

He walked out to the balcony.

He walked back in.

He walked back out.

Finally, there was no help for it. He was beyond evasions now.

Without looking at Cicero, he said, "Take me to the Throne of God."

No trace of Boone's violent end remained. Every least particle of blood had been cleaned away in his absence. The room was as sterile and empty as if no one had walked here for a thousand years. Or as if no one ever *had* walked here, since the first recorded tick of time.

Hanson sat gingerly down on the Throne, his body tensed and aching to leap up and away from its cold electric touch. He felt a surge of icy terror, but fought it down. This was the one moment in his life when he had a chance to actually *change* things, probably the one moment in the lives of all the hundreds of ancestors who'd striven and fought and toiled to produce him in the first place, who had lived their lives and broken their hearts and died without ever encountering a single moment where anything they did had even the remotest chance of effecting a real change in the world. This was the only chance any of them would *ever* have, even if he went back to the human world and had a dozen children and they lived a thousand generations more. This was the one chance for all of them, that chain of lives stretching back into the distant past and ahead into the unimaginable future. This one moment, here and now. He had to give it his best shot, and hope that things would work out all right. He didn't really know what he was doing, or what the consequences of it might be, but he knew he had to *try*. Perhaps it had been no different for God Himself, in the Beginning, when He'd set out to create the world.

He clutched the Throne's arms. "Show me where we are."

Cicero gestured, and the tower, walls and stairs and ceiling alike, became transparent.

Hanson stared over the City to the Wall, and over it as well, as if from a height even greater than the tower's: stared upon a landscape rendered toylike by distance, like a cunningly crafted panorama or three-dimensional map, but one in which things moved and changed position, as in the image cast by a *camera obscura* (one of which he'd seen in the Courthouse in Orange, as a boy) so that you could see horses and transports moving on the roads, and people working in the fields, and cows wandering as they grazed, and trees swaying in the wind. Through some post-Utopian magic, it seemed like he could see everything at once, see it all clearly and distinctly, no matter how far away it was, his whole old world laid out at his feet. First there were the Utopian ruins overgrown in calamity weed and scrub oak; somewhere down there was the clearing in which he'd met Boone. Then the road up which the transport had come so very long ago, leading back to the ancient highway that stretched back to the south, past the SI garrisons and gypsy camps, the tiny crossroads towns, the vast glinting silver snake of the river, the high iron bridge over the Hudson, and on to the patchwork of hard-

scrabble farms beyond, which clung precariously to a series of gently rolling hills like the folds of a carelessly thrown quilt. Then, finally, by the horizon, a low grey smear of buildings where Orange was. Leaning forward, looking closer, he could make out the fetid streets of the Bog, rising up into Blackstone (he almost thought he could see the window of his old apartment, where he had lived with Becky for so many bittersweet years), and then up into the Swank, tidy tree-lined squares surrounded by fine old brick-and-iron buildings. He could see the rusty-orange Courthouse dome, one of the few specks of color in a sea of brown wood and grey brick, and imagined that if he could somehow see *within* the dome itself he would see himself as a small child staring fascinated at the table where the image from the *camera obscura* shifted and glittered, as if the Utopian optics through which he was looking could somehow let him see back through time as well as off through space (as who knew if they could *not?*) … And then, raising his eyes, up the slopes of Industry Hill to the highest point in Orange, he saw at last the massive ugly bulk of the State Factory, where he had slaved away the best days of his life, where he had poured out his youth like water onto thirsty ground. If he leaned forward a bit more, he could see the lip of the Pit itself, and tiny figures moving on it, shoveling, turning away to dump their coal onto the pile, turning back to shovel again, bending and straightening, their tiny matchstick arms and legs scissoring, and perhaps one of them was Gossard, or the New Man, or—recalling his fancy of a moment before—perhaps even Hanson himself, staring at the Wall of the City of God as he shoveled, thinking all the while about God staring back at him with a huge watery eye, tall as the sky.

Something caught in Hanson's throat, and he blinked back sudden tears. No one knew better than he not to romanticize the world stretched out there below, no one knew better than he the miseries and brutalities it contained, the sickness and the poverty and the filth, the tyranny and murder. From up here, you couldn't see the crooked politics and institutionalized cruelties that were housed beneath the Courthouse dome that looked so picturesque and attractive. From up here, you saw only the pastoral beauty of the fields and the patchwork farms; you didn't see the grotesquely mutated animals and the cows with cancerous running sores and the "sour spots" in the fields, places too thoroughly drenched in ancient chemical poisons for anything to ever grow there again for millennia to come. Hanson *knew* all that, none knew it better.

And yet, even so, he was homesick.

He wanted to go home, wherever home was. Maybe not back to Orange, necessarily, but *home*. Back to the human world. Back where he belonged. Back to where children went fishing in the summertime and women leaned out of windows to catch a breath of air at evening, back to where cows grazed and people drank beer and laughed, back to where folks fell in love and had babies and grew old and died. Away from the inhuman, unchanging, cruel and incomprehensible alien splendor of *this* place.

"All that you can see, from here to the Wall," Cicero said, "is subject to your manipulation."

"How do I turn off the Wall?" Hanson asked gruffly.

"A twenty-mile section of it is under your control." Cicero waved a hand, indicating an arc reaching from horizon to horizon. "It can only be turned off by depriving this entire segment of the City of all higher functions. I do not advise it. If, however, that is what you wish to do, I will guide you through the protocol."

Hanson took a deep breath. "A'right," he said. "Let's do it."

He seized the chair's grips. The needles converged upon his skull.

To his surprise, it did not hurt. A glowing sensation radiated from the base of his spine, a pervasive warmth like the sun on a summer's afternoon. Lucid calm flooded his brain and he became aware of a thousand distant structures and devices, not as any kind of detailed knowledge but in much the same way he was aware of parts of his own body, ignorant of their inner workings but, with the slightest concentration, in control.

"What do I do now?"

"Make yourself aware of the Wall."

"A'right." He felt it now, within him, a glowing length of immaterial and impervious substance, reaching down three times further into the bedrock than it extended above the ground. A thin, thin line reached even further down, impossibly far, toward the core of the Earth, tapping energies incomprehensively greater than any he'd ever imagined. No phantom guardian appeared. No one challenged him. He did not ascend, descend, vibrate, scream. "What now?"

"Imagine a blue triangle. Within it, imagine a yellow circle. Now imagine that circle turning red."

He did.

Twenty miles of the Wall ceased to be.

It took Hanson three weeks to make his way out of Heaven to the mortal realm of York. He could still summon a cyclone by stepping on a silver pad, but he could not make it take him where he wanted to go. His first attempt carried him so far from the Wall that he was not tempted to try a second time, lest he lose himself so thoroughly he might never find his way out again.

Without Cicero, the City of God was unspeakably dangerous, capricious in unforeseeable ways. There was, so far as he could tell, no malice to it, but he was like a child lost in a steel mill; power was everywhere and he did not understand its purposes. The post-Utopians hadn't turned off any of their machines before they had gone away to wherever it was they had gone. And Cicero, who understood its workings, was gone too, cancelled out along with the twenty miles of Wall, never mentioning that he was one of the "higher functions" that Hanson's command would send to oblivion. Hanson found he missed Cicero more than he did Boone, though the one was only a function and the other a real human being.

It was an awful thing to have to admit to himself.

He lived off rain water and what vermin he could catch, and he was often sick. It was a hellish time for him. But he kept going, determined that if he were going to die, he would at least make it to the Human Domain first. He would die on his own side of the Wall.

When finally, starving, Hanson crossed over into the borderlands of York, he was taken prisoner by a troop of State soldiers. They were out in force, establishing a string of camps where the Wall had been, digging ditches and earthwork ramparts, re-creating a crude parody of the Wall in order to control access to the City of God and its many presumed treasures. They were all of them badly spooked by this turn of events, fearful and uncertain of what the future would bring. An unquestioned chock of their reality had crumbled without warning, and if *that* could happen, then who was to say what else might or might not?

"Hands up!" the soldier shouted. He held his rifle too tensely. He was ungodly young, a child really. When Hanson obeyed, he eased hardly at all, remaining as taut as an over-wound spring. "You're in bad trouble, mister."

"A'right," Hanson said. His head swam dizzily; he had to fight down a suicidal urge to caper and dance. But even in his weak and giddy state, he was particularly anxious not to be shot, not at this late date. "Y'caught me. You're the boss. I'll do whatever you say."

"Where'd you come from, anyway? How'd you get past the line?"

Line? "I came from the east." He gestured with his head, keeping his hands up as steady as he could. "Beyond where the Wall used to be."

The boy's eyes widened.

Two more soldiers came out of the woods. They both looked tough, but one looked mean as well.

"What you got?" one asked.

"This'n says he come from over the Wall."

"Yeah, right."

"So what do we do with him?"

The soldiers glanced one at another. There was an uneasy moment of balance when Hanson's fate could have gone any which way. The mean-looking soldier cocked up his mouth to one side, and, unslinging his rifle, said, "Too much fucking trouble to walk him back, if you ask *me* ..."

The boyish soldier gaped at him, too horrified to interfere.

Talking quickly, saying any fool thing that came into his head, Hanson said, "Hey, any of you boys come from Orange? That's where I'm from, that's my neck of the woods. Maybe you got family back there? What are their names? Might be I know them." Crazy, nonsensical stuff he was saying, but it didn't matter—anything to establish contact.

The third soldier stared hard at him. Then—

"Fuck it," he said, and pushed the rifle barrel out of line, away from Hanson. The mean-looking one gave him an angry look, then turned his head to the side, spat, and re-slung his rifle.

The soldier who'd just saved Hanson's life looked tired. "We'll take him to camp. He can answer questions there."

They tied his hands behind his back and started down the road. Hanson went quietly. He knew his answers would not please their superior officers. Their questions would be all wrong. It didn't matter, though. He had done his part.

He had opened the City of God for them.

It might be some good would come of it. Anything was possible. He didn't intend to dwell on it, though. What they did with it was their concern, not his.

They walked on in silence for a while. Hanson felt weak and dizzy. After a mile or so, one of the soldiers struck a narc on his thigh, took a long drag to get it started, and stuck it in Hanson's mouth.

He mumbled his thanks. They wouldn't untie his hands, but after he'd sucked in, the young soldier who'd captured him took the narc out again so he could exhale.

The two older soldiers tended to keep a cautious distance from him, but the younger one hung at his side, not frightened any longer but curious, intrigued, obviously thinking over what Hanson had said earlier. Finally, he couldn't keep his questions in any longer. "You really been—" he made a gesture with his head, "back *there?*"

Hanson nodded wordlessly.

"Inside the City, I mean."

"*Ai.* S'pose I have."

"You ever seen … you know?"

The kid asked it in a hushed kind of way, the religious feelings of his childhood apparently not entirely dead yet, for the blasphemy of a ragged drifter like Hanson claiming to have come from the City of God was clearly thrilling and alarming to him. His buddies, skeptical, intrigued, moved a little closer to hear Hanson's answer.

"You mean God?" Hanson began to laugh. He couldn't help it. Stumbling to a halt, he managed to control himself, to still the painful laughter for just long enough to look into the boy's anxious face and say, "Fool! D'you mean to say you ain't heard yet? *God is dead!*"

He doubled over then, roaring with laughter. His eyes filled with tears, and still he couldn't stop. He laughed until he choked.

The soldiers waited until he could breathe again. Then they yanked him upright and double-checked his bonds.

They all four headed down the road.

The Dead

Cast of Characters

Donald Nichols: age 32; successful business executive.
Courtney Soffner: age 35; full partner in Loeb and Soffner Associates.
Koestler: age 63; owner and founder of Koestler Biological.
Waiter: age 11 at time of death; a zombie.
Whore: age 24 at time of death; a zombie.
Bruno: age 28 at time of death; a zombie.
Chauffeur: Possibly a zombie.
Security Guard
Referee
Two Guards: Non-speaking roles.

The Time: Twenty years in the future.
The Place: Manhattan.

Scenes: Interior of *La Morgue,* a restaurant.
A stretch limo.
Heaven, a fisticuffs club.
Courtney's apartment.
Donald's hotel room.

Scene: *La Morgue*, an elegant and expensive Manhattan restaurant. [*Sounds of soft piano music, silverware and crystal, subdued conversation and gracious laughter.*]

DONALD This is my first time in a restaurant with zombie waiters.

COURTNEY There aren't many in existence. This one specializes in boy zombies. They look so lovely in their red jackets. Their eyes are so dark. Their flesh is so … luminous.

DONALD This is in terribly bad taste, Courtney.

COURTNEY This is Manhattan, Donald. A certain studied offensiveness is fashionable here.

WAITER [*in a clear, emotionless, boyish voice*] Are you ready to order now?

COURTNEY I'll have the pheasant.

DONALD I'll … have the same.

WAITER An excellent choice.

DONALD Just a second. What's your name, son?

WAITER Timothy. [*pause*] Will there be anything else?

DONALD No … no. Nothing else.

WAITER I'll be back with your wine in just a minute.

COURTNEY What a beautiful boy. He couldn't have been more than eleven when he died. Did you notice how pure and pale his skin was? Connoisseurs call that "milk-glass." He must have cost a bundle.

DONALD I wouldn't know.

COURTNEY How lovely he would look—in the nude. Standing in the moonlight by a cliff. Definitely a cliff. Perhaps the very one where he met his death.

DONALD He wouldn't look very lovely if he'd fallen off a cliff.

COURTNEY Oh, don't be unpleasant.

WAITER Your wine.

DONALD Chateau La Tour '17. Good lord, Courtney, you *seduced* me on cheaper.

COURTNEY This is a business dinner, Donald, nothing more.

DONALD Of course.

COURTNEY [*exasperated noise*]

[*Sound of the clink of wine glasses.*]

DONALD So what is the august firm of Loeb and Soffner up to these days?

COURTNEY We're structuring a corporate expansion. Jim's putting together the financial side of the package, and I'm doing personnel. You're being headhunted, Donald. You're talented, you're thuggish, and you're not too tightly nailed to your present position. Those are all qualities we're looking for.

[*Sound of sheet of paper being unfolded.*]

COURTNEY These are the terms I'm offering.

DONALD This is a lateral transfer.

COURTNEY But with unlimited opportunity for advancement—if you've got the stuff.

DONALD Mmm. [*mumbling*] Insurance … retirement … all pretty much what I'm getting now. Salary is … [*with grudging admiration*] my current salary, to the dollar—you're showing off, Ms. Soffner. Stock options … [*a pause*] This can't be right. Not for a lateral.

COURTNEY I knew you'd like it. We're going over the top with the options because we need your answer right away—tonight preferably. Tomorrow at the latest. No negotiations. We have to put the package together fast. There's going to be a firestorm of publicity when this comes out. We want to have everything nailed down, so we can present the religious fundamentalists and bleeding heart liberals with a *fait accompli*. By the time they learn what's going down, it'll be too late for them to do anything about it.

DONALD My God, Courtney, what kind of monster do you have hold of now?

COURTNEY The biggest one in the world. Bigger than Apple. Bigger than Home Virtual. Bigger than HIVac-IV. Have you ever heard of Koestler Biological?

DONALD Koestler? You're peddling corpses now?

COURTNEY Please. Postanthropic biological resources.

DONALD There's no money in it.

WAITER Is everything all right, sir?

DONALD Yes, fine. No, wait, stand there for a minute. Courtney, take a good look at this creature. The staff here must be—what?—maybe two percent of the annual turnover? Zombies are luxury goods: servants, reactor cleanups, Hollywood stunt deaths, exotic services …

COURTNEY [*amused*] Exotic services?

DONALD We both know what I mean. So how much of a market is there for zombies? A few hundred a year, maybe, tops. There's not the demand. The revulsion factor is too great.

COURTNEY There's been a technological breakthrough. They can install the infrasystem and controllers and offer the product for the factory-floor cost of a new subcompact. That's way below the economic threshold for blue-collar labor.

[DONALD *makes a doubting noise.*]

COURTNEY Look at it from the viewpoint of a typical factory owner. He's already downsized to the bone and labor costs are bleeding him dry. How can he compete in a dwindling consumer market? Now let's imagine he buys into the program. No benefits. No liability suits. No sick pay. No pilferage. We're talking about cutting labor costs by at least two thirds. Minimum! That's irresistible, I don't care how big your revulsion factor is. We project we can move five hundred thousand units in the first year.

DONALD Five hundred thousand. That's crazy. Where the hell are you going to get the raw material for—?

COURTNEY Africa.

DONALD Oh, God, Courtney. Even for *you* that's cynical. Aren't things bad enough there as it is? Do you know what the people who run the death camps are like? They make Adolf Hitler look like a Boy Scout. And you'd deal with them?

COURTNEY In a New York minute.

DONALD I'm … well, what can I say? I'm speechless.

COURTNEY Then I think you're ready to talk with Koestler. Waiter, I arranged to receive a holographic call here. Did you bring the projector?

WAITER It's right here. You touch this button to put up holographic screens around your table.

[*Sound of a computer bloop noise.*]

WAITER Now you have perfect privacy. As soon as I'm gone, touch this second button, and the other party will be projected onto that chair over there. [*voice fading*] Call if you need anything more.

[*Sound of a computer bloop.*]

COURTNEY Mr. Koestler. It's good to see you again.

KOESTLER [*in a pleased voice*] Ah, Courtney! You're in—New York, yes? At *La Morgue,* with Donald. Did you order the antelope medallions?

COURTNEY No, we had the …

KOESTLER [*kisses fingertips*] Magnificent! They're ever so lightly braised and then smothered in buffalo mozzarella. Nobody makes them better. I had the same dish in Florence the other day, and there was simply no comparison.

DONALD [*clears his throat*] Is that where you're calling from? Italy?

KOESTLER Let's leave out where I am. Corporate kidnapping being the, ah, growth industry it is, I'd rather not have anybody know my exact whereabouts. The question is—what do you think of my offer?

DONALD It's … interesting. For a lateral.

KOESTLER It's the start-up costs that prevent me from offering more. We're leveraged up to our asses as it is. You'll make out better this way in the long run. [*lowers voice confidentially*] You're not sold. You know you can trust Courtney to have checked out the finances. Still, you think It won't work. To work the product has to be irresistible, and it's not. It can't be.

DONALD Yes, sir. Succinctly put.

KOESTLER Courtney … Let's sell this young man. Donald, my stretch is downstairs. Meet me there as soon as you've eaten.

[*Sound of blooping noise of hologram going off.*]

Scene: A stretch limo. *[Sounds of automobile engine idling in underground garage, doors slamming, bloop of hologram going on.]*

KOESTLER Come in, come in. Make yourselves at home.

CHAUFFEUR [*in a dead, zombie voice*] Where to, sir?

KOESTLER Take us to Heaven.

CHAUFFEUR Yes, sir. Security is opening the doors now, sir.

[*Sounds of heavy doors being powered open, a rap on the window.*]

SECURITY GUARD The street's clear. There are two robot guns over the doorway. They'll cover you for the first block. You should be fine after that.

CHAUFFEUR Very good.

[*Sound of car noises comes up.*]

DONALD Courtney tells me you're getting the raw materials from Africa.

COURTNEY [*warningly*] Donald.

KOESTLER Dealing with our sub-Saharan sources is distasteful, but necessary. To begin with. We have to sell the idea first—no reason to

make things rough on ourselves. Down the line, though, I don't see why we can't go domestic. Something along the lines of a reverse mortgage, perhaps, life insurance that pays off while you're still alive. [*changing tone*] It'd be a step towards getting the poor off our backs at last. They've been getting a goddamn free ride for too long. The way I see it, the least they can do is to die and provide us with servants.

[DONALD *begins to laugh politely, then realizes he's laughing alone, and stops. He coughs, trying to recover.*]

DONALD So, ah … You told the guard to take us to Heaven. What *is* Heaven?

KOESTLER [*with great satisfaction*] Heaven is a proving ground for the future. Have you ever witnessed bare-knuckles fisticuffs?

DONALD No.

KOESTLER Ah, now there's a sport for gentlemen! The sweet science at its sweetest. No rounds, no rules, no holds barred. It gives you the real measure of a man—not just of his strength but his character. How he handles himself, whether he keeps cool under pressure—how he stands up to pain. Security won't let me go to the clubs in person, but I've made arrangements.

[*Sound of car noises.*]

CHAUFFEUR We're here, sir. Wait inside just a second, please.

[*Sounds of door opens and closes, trunk opens, then slams, clash of heels on cement.*]

CHAUFFEUR You may get out now. These are your bodyguards.

DONALD You had these guys stashed in the *trunk?*

COURTNEY It's a new world, Donald. Get used to it.

KOESTLER You two go ahead. I'll meet you up in my private box.

Scene: Heaven, a fisticuffs club. [*Sound of boxing club noises.*]

REFEREE Weighing two-five-oh, in black trunks with a red stripe, tha gang-bang *gang*sta, tha bare-knuckle *brawla,* tha man with tha *may*hem—

[*Fade to sound of* COURTNEY *and* DONALD *settling into their seats.*]

KOESTLER You're just in time. The fight's about to begin.

DONALD You've got a hologram rig permanently installed here?

KOESTLER All of this is for your sake, Donald—you and a few others we hope to recruit. I've arranged a little demonstration here. We're pitting our product one-on-one against some of the local talent. What you're going to see tonight will settle your doubts once and for all.

COURTNEY You'll like this. I've been here five nights straight. Counting tonight.

[*Sound of bell ringing, starting the fight. Sound of crowd noises comes up.*]

COURTNEY The zombie is the one in white trunks.

DONALD Not very muscular for a fighter, is he?

KOESTLER Ah, but see how he holds his eyes, how alert he is, how light on his feet. And those eyes! Absolutely calm. Dead calm.

COURTNEY [*whistles*] Look at his opponent—what a bruiser! That guy is massive! His eyes are so intense. He looks half crazy. More like an animal than a human being. Like a maddened bull.

DONALD What's with the scars?

KOESTLER Those are gang scars on his chest—initiation marks of his criminal affiliations. Those on his back, though, the ugly ones, probably aren't deliberate. More likely something he earned on the streets.

[*Sound of fast jabs.*]

COURTNEY This one's going to be harder for your zombie to beat than the others were. He moves like a tiger. Sure of himself. Dangerous.

KOESTLER [*shouts*] Kill him! Break his face!

[*Sounds of more blows, the last particularly loud.*]

COURTNEY Wow! Did you see that?

KOESTLER Ouch!

DONALD That's illegal, isn't it? I mean, you can't just punch somebody in the nuts like that.

KOESTLER This is fisticuffs, Donald. No rules, remember? Anyway, take a look at my product: No reaction whatsoever. You could hit him down there with a sledge hammer, and it wouldn't slow him down a bit.

[*Sounds of a flurry of punches, fast and hard, the crowd roaring their approval.*]

DONALD Your zombie doesn't seem very aggressive.

KOESTLER His instructions are to fight defensively at first. In order to demonstrate the kind of punishment the product can take. He'll go on the offensive any minute now.

[*Sound of the crowd roaring.*]

COURTNEY What a blow!

KOESTLER You'll notice that it didn't even stagger him.

[*Sound of the crowd roaring again.*]

COURTNEY Yes!

KOESTLER I believe that a punch like that would have killed most living fighters. [*raising his voice*] Smash him! Rip his lungs out. Hah! Now the zombie's on the counterattack!

DONALD My God, look at that poor man's expression. He's beaten, and he knows it.

COURTNEY He's been driven back into the ropes.

KOESTLER Oh, this is sweet!

DONALD I can't imagine what it must be like for a man who's always lived by his strength and his ability to absorb punishment to realize that he's facing an opponent to whom pain means nothing. It must be devastating.

KOESTLER [*chortling*] Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

DONALD [*quietly*] Courtney, do you remember the last time we were together? Back at the hotel?

COURTNEY What are you talking about? Shush. I want to watch the fight.

[*Sound of the fight fades away, sound of flashback music, heavy breathing.*]

Scene: Courtney's apartment.

COURTNEY Please, Donald. Don't make me do that.

DONALD [*mimicking*] Please, Donald. Don't make me do that. Don't play innocent with me, baby. You like it just a little bit sick, don't you? Don't you? I can make you do anything I want you to do. Admit it. I can make you beg for it.

COURTNEY [*moaning*] No, no.

DONALD Do you want me to leave?

COURTNEY Yes ... no ... I don't know.

DONALD Then beg. Otherwise I'll just get up, put my clothes on, and walk out of here. Your choice, baby.

COURTNEY Please ...

DONALD Please what?

COURTNEY Please make me do it.

DONALD Sometimes I wonder what you really want. It must be something repulsive, or we'd've done it already. Just what is it you want from me?

COURTNEY You're such a bastard. I'm sorry I ever met you.

DONALD That goes double for me, baby. You taught me things about myself I never wanted to know. It's not as if I enjoy doing these things to you.

COURTNEY [*teasing*] Oh? Then why do you do them?

DONALD Because I'm obsessed with you.

COURTNEY Why?

DONALD It's your desperation. That's what makes me want you so. All that need, all that longing. It makes you so hot. I wish your desperation were a liquid that I could drink down to the dregs. I wish I could drop you in a wine press and squeeze you dry.

COURTNEY And this is supposed to make everything all right, is it? This is supposed to make you feel good about yourself?

DONALD No. I don't think I'll ever feel good about myself again.

COURTNEY Then force me to do something. Something filthy. Something no decent woman would ever do. Abuse me. Degrade me. And when you're done … get the hell out of my apartment.

[*Sound of boxing noises come up. Sound of* COURTNEY *and* KOESTLER, *both yelling.*]

Scene: Heaven.

COURTNEY He's on the ropes!

KOESTLER Hit him! Hit him!

[*Sound of ugly, heavy blows.*]

DONALD Ugh! Look at the blood.

COURTNEY He's down, he's down!

KOESTLER Ahhh. An excellent fight. Shall we meet in the limo?

[*Sound of blooping noise.*]

DONALD [*sadly*] The big guy never had a chance.

COURTNEY So?

DONALD He must've known early on that it was hopeless, that he wasn't going to win. But he refused to take a fall. He had to be pounded into the ground. He went down raging, proud and uncomplaining. You have to admire that.

COURTNEY But he lost anyway.

DONALD Maybe that's the message I'm supposed to take away from this. Not just that the product is robust. But that anybody who goes up against it is going to lose.

COURTNEY Perhaps.

DONALD It's the end of an era. A man's body isn't worth a damn anymore. There isn't anything it could do that technology couldn't handle better. The number of losers in the world has just doubled. Tripled. Hit maximum. And those fools cheered! They cheered! Not one of those idiots had the wit to realize that what they were cheering for was the death of their futures.

COURTNEY You cheered too.

DONALD What else could I do?

[*Sound of boxing noises fade, sound of car noises comes up.*]

Scene: Stretch limo.

KOESTLER [*jovially*] Well, Donald. You've seen the light. You're a believer now.

DONALD I haven't necessarily decided yet.

KOESTLER Don't bullshit me. I've done my homework, Mr. Nichols. Your current position is not exactly secure. Morton-Western is going down the tubes. The entire service sector is going down the tubes. Face it, the old economic order is as good as up and gone. Of course you're going to take my offer. You don't have any other choice. [*pause*] I'm faxing you the contract now. Read it and sign it.

[*Sounds of a humming noise, and of paper ripped from a fax.*]

DONALD "A Certain Product," it says. Christ, I'm agreeing to work for a company that's ashamed to name its own product. [*sighs*] Okay, where's a pen?

KOESTLER Wait. I've got a factory. Three thousand positions under me. I've got a motivated workforce. They'd walk through fire to keep their jobs. Pilferage is at zero. Sick time practically the same. Give me one advantage your product has over my current workforce. Sell me on it. I'll give you thirty seconds.

DONALD I'm not in sales, Mr. Koestler. Anyway, you've already promised me the job. Why should I have to interview for it?

KOESTLER Because when you asked for a pen, you admitted you want the position. So now we both know whose hand carries the whip. Don't we? [*pause*] Well? Sell me. Why are zombies better than people?

DONALD Your new work force can be catheterized—no more toilet breaks.

KOESTLER [*moment's astonished silence; then he bursts into laughter*] By God, that's a new one! You have a great future ahead of you, Donald. Welcome aboard.

[*Sound of the bloop of a hologram winking out.*]

DONALD Well. That went well. I guess.

COURTNEY [*raps on window*] Driver—take me home.

[*Sound of car noises.*]

DONALD [*quietly*] Manhattan looks like a graveyard tonight. All those grey faces. All those listless people. They all look like so many corpses to me. Over there, in the Children's Museum—look at the mother standing behind the glass doors with a stroller and two small children by her side. They're all motionless. They're all staring out into nothing. They're all zombies.

COURTNEY Are they?

DONALD Look up in the apartment windows—the lights are all off; there's nothing but those sad little rainbows where the zombies are watching MTVirtual. Look down on the street—the zombies are sitting on the stoops, drinking forties out of paper bags. Look at them! There are zombies in the park, zombies smoking blunts, zombies driving taxis, zombies hanging out on street corners … All of them waiting—and for what? For the years to pass and the flesh to fall from their bones.

COURTNEY You're certainly in a morbid mood tonight.

DONALD I feel like the last man alive.

[*Sounds of the soft noise of an elevator, a floor bell rings, footsteps, door opening.*]

Scene: Hallway outside Courtney's apartment.

COURTNEY Well. All in all, a productive evening. Good night, Donald.

DONALD Good night? Aren't you going to invite me inside?

COURTNEY No.

DONALD [*angrily*] What do you mean, no? What kind of idiot game are you playing now?

COURTNEY You know what no means, Donald. You're not stupid.

DONALD No I'm not, and neither are you. We both know the score. You *stink* of pheromones! A blind man could tell you're in heat from the other side of the street. A chimpanzee could talk his way into your pants. Now let me in, goddamnit.

COURTNEY Enjoy your present.

[*Sound of a door closing.*]

DONALD What present? What are you talking about? [*slams door with fist*] Damn!

[*Sounds of transition music, rattle of a key in a lock;* DONALD *sighs.*]

Scene: Donald's hotel room.

DONALD Christ, what a night.

[*Sound of a glass being knocked over.*]

DONALD [*panicked*] Who's there? [*trying to stay calm*] Listen, if it's credit-jackers, you can have my cards. I'll give you my security codes. You don't have to torture me to get them. [*muttering*] Where the hell is that light switch?

[*Sound of a switch being flicked on.*]

DONALD Nobody's here. [*louder*] Hello?

WHORE [*in distance*] I'm out on the balcony.

[*Sounds of footsteps, glass doors opening, soft tinkle of wind chimes.*]

WHORE [*in a husky voice*] Hello, Donald. This is for you.

DONALD A lily? [*wonderingly*] You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. You're … [*is hit by a sudden thought*] You're … not alive, are you?

WHORE No, Donald. I've been dead for five weeks. And I'm yours for the night. Courtesy of Loeb and Soffner Associates.

DONALD [*softly, intensely*] God damn you, Courtney. God damn you to hell and back.

[*Sound of transition music.*]

[*Sounds of repeated doorbell rings, hammering noises, an opening door.*]

Scene: Courtney's apartment.

COURTNEY Donald! You can't come in … I'm not alone.

DONALD I didn't come here for the dubious pleasures of your fair white body. [*pushes into the room; speaks sarcastically*] Nice dressing gown. Pierre Cardin?

COURTNEY [*amused*] You didn't like my surprise?

DONALD No, I fucking did not!

COURTNEY Control yourself, Donald. You're shaking.

DONALD I'll show you shaking.

COURTNEY Bruno, would you come in here? Don't bother to put your clothes on.

BRUNO Yes, miss.

COURTNEY Isn't he pretty? Broad shoulders, narrow waist. Pumped, ripped, and just the most beautiful skin—like ebony. It's flawless, too. I've checked everywhere.

DONALD [*horrified*] Courtney, this man is, is—

COURTNEY Dead. The word is "dead," Donald. He's a zombie. A gift from Koestler.

DONALD [*disgusted*] Oh, for God's sake, Courtney! I can't believe you. That you'd actually … That thing's not even human. Not anymore. There's nothing there—no passion, no connection, just … just an obedient body.

COURTNEY When was I ever anything more than that to you? [*nastily*] Now we're even.

DONALD [*hysterical*] All right! You like seeing people getting hit so much, I'm tempted to show you what it feels like—bitch! I'm going to bounce your head off the wall.

COURTNEY Hit him in the body, Bruno. But leave his face alone. He has to look good in a business suit.

BRUNO Yes, miss.

[*Sounds of punches, gasps of pain.*]

COURTNEY That's enough, baby. Now put out the trash.

[*Sounds of door opening, body being dumped in the hall.*]

DONALD [*sobbing*] You … you … Look at yourself! You, you're nothing but a … pathetic … ugly … aging … pervert. A necrophile! A corpse-humper!

COURTNEY [*almost purring*] I suggest you cultivate a taste for it. Half a million Brunos are about to come on the market. You're going to find it a lot more difficult to pick up *living* women in not so very long.

[*Sound of transition music.*]

Scene: Donald's hotel room.

WHORE Are you ready for me, Donald? What do you want me to do?

DONALD What are you doing still here?

WHORE Do you want me to go?

DONALD Yes! … no … I don't know.

[*Sound of glass doors opening onto balcony.*]

DONALD God. Manhattan looks so glorious and pathetic all at once. It's all beauty and darkness. A billion lights. More lights than there are stars in the sky.

WHORE Do you need company? I'm capable of conversation. Tell me how you feel.

DONALD Afraid. More afraid than I've ever been in my life.

WHORE Why?

DONALD Just look out there—the slums stretching to infinity. As of tonight, they're a necropolis, a never-ending city of the dead. Think of the millions out there who were never going to hold down a job again. Think of how they must hate me—me and my kind—and how helpless they are before us.

WHORE When they're dead, they won't care.

DONALD And yet. There are so many of them and so few of us. If they were to all rise up at once, they'd be like a tidal wave. They'd be like an earthquake. They'd be irresistible. And if there's so much as a spark of life left in them, then that is exactly what they will do.

WHORE If you say so.

DONALD That's one possibility. There is one other, and that is that I'm worrying about nothing. That nothing will happen. Nothing at all. [*pause*] God help me, but I didn't know which possibility scares me more.

WHORE Donald?

DONALD Yes?

WHORE Are you ready for me now?

They Fell Like Wheat

In the early 18th century, the British Lords of the Admiralty, convening in London, decided in their wisdom that what the Navy needed was a Marine. So, as a kind of pilot program, they hired, trained, and equipped an appropriate individual for the role, and placed him aboard a ship of the line headed out for action.

Which was not long in coming. In the first action, off the Azores, the ship carrying the Marine closed upon and grappled with the enemy. The Marine was sent on board and, with cutlass and pistol, performed his duty in an exemplary fashion.

So exemplary indeed was his performance that the Lords of Admiralty decided, again in their wisdom, to recruit, train, and equip a second Marine. Who was then sent off on the same ship as the first.

Soon enough, the Marines saw action. The ship they were on grappled with the enemy and they went charging over the rail with cutlass and pistol, and with exemplary dispatch, cleared the deck.

Afterwards, it is recorded, the two Marines had a conversation, while cleaning their weapons.

"Wow!" said the second (or words to that effect), "that was terrific! That was a really great battle."

But the first Marine looked at him said, "Aw, that was nothing! You shoulda been in the *old* outfit!"

When I published my first story, back in the days when we all wallowed in the straw of ancient caverns and cave bears bellowed with-

out, all the way back in 1980, science fiction was like the village of Macondo in Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*—a place so small and obscure that Death had not discovered it. So few major science fiction writers had ever died that you could probably count them on the fingers of two hands. In fact, that would have made a good fannish game—to list ten important science fiction writers who were dead.

Back then Asimov, Heinlein, Simak, Dick, Leiber, Sturgeon—oh, too many to list!—were still alive, and attending conventions. The entire history of the field was ambulatory, clear-witted, and, usually, drunk in the bar. It was as if, in the mainstream, you could go to a convention and meet Faulkner, the Brontës, Tolstoy, Goethe, and the author of *Beowulf*. The Venerable Bede might buttonhole you in the hallway, and in his hideous Old English accent discuss the dynastic implications of Prince Charles and Princess Di. A boring old fart, but one you had to listen to respectfully, because what he'd written was important.

Everyone was alive then, and I'm here to tell you that they were all twenty feet tall. Robert A. Heinlein himself walked past me and I felt the radioactive heat of his afterburners. So I ought to have some terrific stories to tell about these guys.

But I don't. I started going to conventions twenty-one years ago, and I saw all the greats, but I don't have a single dining-out anecdote about any of them. That's not why I was there. I was attending every convention I could get to because I was trying to figure out how to be a writer, and I knew the secret was here somewhere. This blind groping toward articulation is a desperately important process for a gonnabe writer, and it's one that doesn't work if you waste your time showing a decent respect for your elders.

(The process apparently did involve sitting around with Joe Haldeman and other literary lights at 3 a.m. in the morning on the bathroom floor of a hotel room passing around a fifth of Scotch. But I digress.)

In 1973 I arrived in Philadelphia with $70, a friend who was willing to let me crash in his living room for a month, and an absolute determination to become a science fiction writer. I weighed 180 pounds. Six months later, when I finally found work, I weighed 130. I had lost fifty pounds over the winter. To keep alive, I sold my blood, typed term

papers for a dollar a page, and composed them for not much more. I wrote very bad prose, and threw away every word of it, and had nightmares when I could sleep, and sat by my window listening to the whores down on the street arguing with their pimps when I could not.

It did not seem to me then too high a price to pay.

It still does not.

A few years later I went with two friends to a convention so small that the con committee took us all out for pizza for supper—and pizza by the slice at that. We writers reminisced about our bygone days of poverty (though by any rational standard we were all still poor enough) and told our war stories about days without food and apartments without heat, and the kind of squalor that would gag a cockroach.

Their eyes got as big as plates. The oldest of them was nineteen, and you could see the thought going through their heads: "My God—these guys not only got to write great literature, but they had *poverty too!*"

Well, I understand that. The lure of *la vie bohème* is a powerful one. But poverty is also realizing that you only have enough money for a loaf of bread or a pack of cigarettes and buying the cigarettes, because tobacco will blunt your craving for food better than food will blunt your craving for tobacco. It's "the poor man's root canal"—going to the free clinic in agonizing pain to have teeth extracted that money could yet save. Sometimes it's almost dying because you haven't the money to waste on asking a doctor why you find it difficult to walk anymore and how come your vision is failing and the world is turning black.

These are all things that I've seen happen to friends, and they happened because of science fiction. What is science fiction that we should value it so?

I can't give you a direct answer, because what a writer values most is what is yet Unwritten, and thus to me science fiction is exactly what I *can't* point at. So let's approach this by looking at something that sounds like science fiction, but is not. First the quotation:

> By a process of elimination the deadly art of war may finally be reduced to a refined and gentlemanly exchange of courtesies. As fast as inventors work out some unusually deadly contrivance, efforts are made to have its use stricken from the list of respectable fighting . . . .

> For instance, just as the aviators and aeronauts after innumerable dangers and not a few accidents are about ready to guarantee the delivery of explosives from lofty heights, at all hours of the day or night, the Hague committee get busy with resolutions which are calculated to spoil the sport. Imagine the satisfaction one of these aerial gunners would experience in relating how from a height of 5,000 feet he landed a ringer in the shape of a bomb on the tip of a church spire, like a pumpkin on a picket fence . . . .
>
> However, we still have hope in perfecting an electric catapult which will hurl a bolt of 500,000 volts via a wireless across a thousand miles of sea and hit the mark nine shots out of ten. After that an artificial earthquake would be useful in demolishing the fortifications of an enemy at long range. It might also be a good idea to work out a mechanical soldier in blocks of ten abreast for storming defenses, and controlled by wires or wireless to fire at just the right moment when the operator from a safe distance pushed the button.
>
> Things far less probable are now accomplished facts. Why not these?

That reprehensible passage was not written by Hugo Gernsback or John W. Campbell, though it partakes of the aggressive technophilia of the one and the deliberately provocative posturing of the other. It comes from an editorial in the February 1909 issue of *Popular Mechanics,* and it is particularly chilling to contemplate how many of its young male readers subsequently died in World War One, in light of the fact that the editor, H.H. Windsor, obviously didn't mean a word of it. To him it was only an intellectual game.

In this respect, it's a lot like *Independence Day,* a movie in which the evil aliens are defeated because, fortunately, they're Mac-based. If they'd been DOS aliens, we'd've been up the creek! *Independence Day* looks a lot like science fiction, but is not, and would not work if it were. In the course of its brilliantly manipulative plot one quarter of the Earth's inhabitants and most of its major cities are incinerated. If we were to take this seriously, the triumphant ending could only be a downer. Think of all that's been lost—the libraries, Paris, Michelangelo's *Pietà,* the stock

exchanges, the relatives! But of course we don't take it seriously, because it's not science fiction. It's only a movie.

Which is not to say that there's anything wrong with movies, even movies that try to pass themselves off as science fiction. Nor to imply that there's anything wrong with stories that are *just for fun.* It is only to point out that it is not the trappings that make a work science fiction, but an underlying seriousness to be found even in the light and comic examples of the genre. Mere entertainment is good. But how many of your teeth are you willing to sacrifice for it?

When I sold my first story, *Locus* did not have an obituary page. It was shocking for anybody to die. Now it's commonplace.

The trouble is that science fiction was, as Barry Malzberg has put it, a "single-generation phenomenon." It was built from the ground up over the course of a single long lifetime, and so for the longest time nobody was old enough to die of natural causes. The first writer to do so was like a tocsin bell—he gave the rest permission to follow. They fell like wheat.

This collapse of the field came so suddenly, and was so overwhelmingly disastrous that it's like nothing so much as Davy Crockett's buffalo, which was so enormous that it took three men to see all of it. It's too large a catastrophe to hold in the mind all at once. So let's look at a few specifics.

Avram Davidson died, and Grania Davis, his former wife, is putting in prodigious amounts of labor to get his essential stories back into print. A "best of" volume, *The Avram Davidson Treasury,* was published by Tor, but most of his novels—perhaps all of them—will never see print again.

R.A. Lafferty is currently dying in Oklahoma, and despite the valiant efforts of a handful of small press publishers to bring into print his many unpublished novels—he reportedly has left directions that anything unpublished at his death be destroyed—the very best of his work, *Nine Hundred Grandmothers* and *The Flame Is Green* and *The Devil Is Dead,* to name only three, have been out of print for decades, with no sign that they're ever coming back. Most fans today have no idea of how, at his peak, he towered over the field. They cannot understand why a writer like Gene Wolfe would call Lafferty not only our most original writer, but possibly the most original in all of literature.

Theodore Sturgeon died, and Paul Williams is making a heroic effort to get his complete short fiction issued in a standard, library-

friendly format before it's lost forever. Samuel Delany several times said that Sturgeon was the best writer in the history of the field. He's in danger today of being forgotten.

Alfred Bester died, and with him all the glamour and dazzling respect he once had. In a last bitter jest, he left his literary estate to the bartender who helped him drink himself to death.

C.L. Moore, Henry Kuttner, Leigh Brackett—they are all gone. They don't deserve to be, but they are, and they're not coming back. Clifford Simak, of whom writers like Heinlein and Asimov stood in awe, is gone and I very much doubt that he's coming back either.

I could go on like this for days. We are losing not only a generation of writers, but most of their work as well. Much of it, in ordinary times, *could have been saved.* But these are no ordinary times. So many died, one after the other! So much work needs to be done, and there are so few hands fit for the task. You do what you can, and when you can do no more, you shrug.

A couple of years ago at Readercon, they had a panel called "Grand Masters of the Future," in which they tried to guess who among the younger writers might qualify for the honor in another thirty years. It's essentially a comic notion—I was tempted to make up "Grand Master of the Future" buttons for all my writer friends. But, interestingly enough, I made the short list, and when I thought it over, I realized how my reputation has soared over the past several years. If this were the Olympics, they'd be testing me for steroids.

My feelings were definitely mixed. Because my new stature is not so much the result of my growth as a writer, as of the fact that so much of the competition, the best and brightest of their generation, is no more.

This is not what I wanted. I did not want to *replace* any of the Grand Masters. I just wanted them to scootch over on the couch and let me join them.

How can we face up to the horror of our loss?

Well, for the moment, by slipping back to the year 1975. That's when I first met Gardner Dozois. It was at a science fiction convention and he was sitting on the floor with a circle of fans, demonstrating that parts of Robert A. Heinlein's *Time Enough for Love* could be read to the cadence of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Hiawatha."

Woodrow Smith, of many faces,
many names, and many places,
led this band to New Beginnings,
planet clean and bright as morning.
End of line, he told his shipmates.
Endless miles of untouched prairie,
endless stands of uncut timber,
winding rivers, soaring mountains,
hidden wealth and hidden dangers,
Here is life or here is dying;
only sin is lack of trying.
Grab your picks and grab your shovels;
dig latrines and build your hovels—
next year better, next year stronger,
next year's furrows that much longer.

And so on. Later that evening, after all the parties had shut down, he managed to keep the convention going for another three hours by leading us few hardy survivors up halls and down, in search of that last, secret room party, which he knew must surely exist *some*where. And while we were unsuccessful, we easily had as much fun looking as we would have had we found it.

At that time Gardner had shoulder-length hair and wore a cowboy hat and a t-shirt with enormous letters reading PROPHET OF DOOM. There is no way I could exaggerate how striking his appearance was.

I mention all this in order to help render comprehensible an anecdote Susan Casper likes to tell of how she overheard two writers commiserating each other on the death of all the old greats of science fiction, and bemoaning the fact that with them gone there were no more eccentrics left in the field.

Those two writers were Gardner Dozois and Howard Waldrop.

So maybe—certainly—we're not doing so badly as I've made it sound. We still have eccentrics. We still have major writers. We still have a future, even if it's not the one we thought was barreling down upon us some forty or fifty years ago.

Back at the beginning of this speech I said I had no stories to tell about the bygone greats of the field.

I lied.

I do have one, about Isaac Asimov. I was among a small number of fans who were sucking up to the great man at a Philcon when John Varley was guest of honor. Asimov signed our paperbacks, cracked a few jokes, extemporized a dirty limerick, and then as the others drifted away, stared across the hall at Varley, besieged by a mob of autograph seekers—understandable since it was Varley's first time on the East Coast, and Asimov was a regular at Philcon. Suddenly he looked old and sad. More to himself than me, he murmured, "Look at that. Ten years ago they were all asking 'Who is John Varley?' and ten years from now they'll be asking 'Who is Isaac Asimov?'" Anyone who's read Asimov's final autobiography, *I, Asimov,* will know that this was his true assessment of his own work. He thought that he wasn't a very good fiction writer, and that the success he'd had was the result of luck.

Automatically, without thinking, I said, "Oh, bullshit!" But he didn't hear. And I didn't repeat it, either, because it occurred to me that if I tiptoed away quietly then, I could forever claim to be the man who had greeted one of Asimov's pronouncements with "Bullshit!" and gotten no rejoinder.

It's been ten years since that convention, and more than ten years, and I still haven't heard anyone ask, "Who is Isaac Asimov?" What I *have* heard, within and without the field, is heartfelt expressions of that intense readerly enthusiasm for his best works, for the Foundation trilogy and the robot stories, and some others, which show no signs that they will ever die.

Asimov would've told you that Simak, Bester, Sturgeon, would be thriving when his work was gone and forgotten. But he was not the final judge—or even a reliable judge—of his own worth.

Only posterity can judge the ultimate worth of what we pay so dearly to produce. Sometimes posterity is fickle, and discards diamonds along with the trash. But she is still the best judge we have, and the only one worth a dime. It's a little early to speak, but right now it looks like posterity is planning to preserve—among others, I hope—Isaac Asimov in spite of his money and success, and Philip K. Dick in spite of his poverty and failure.

These are not such bad choices.

Somebody told me recently that he wrote in order to achieve immortality. That since he could not hope to live forever in his body, he

hoped to live forever through his fiction. I can't see that. I hope to write work that will live long after I am gone; but once I'm gone, what does it matter to the story who I was? Should I care that the *Odyssey* was not written by Homer but by somebody else of the same name, of whom we also know nothing?

Science fiction has discovered mortality, and that's a terribly sad thing for us, who so dearly love the work, and by extension the men and women who write it. But even those who stumble and fall and die cursing the readers who will not read, even those who grow fat and complacent and spend their declining decades writing fat and complacent self-parodying imitations of the books they used to write, have all contributed to something greater than the mere self. They have given their lives and breath, their blood and dreams and ideas and most of all their words to the furtherance of the great opus of science fiction.

And it is, I believe, worthy of our sacrifices.

Because science fiction is, to paraphrase something Philip José Farmer said about King Kong, more than just some great, shaggy beast: Oh, no, it dies every evening and in the morning is reborn, like the sun.

A User's Guide to the Postmoderns

Including the Battle for the Future,
Unbridled Ambition,
the Fate of the Children in the Starship,
the Cyberpunk-Humanist Wars,
Blood Under the Banquet Tables,
Metaphors Run Amok,
and the Destruction of Atlantis!

It's been said that every generation creates its own horde of invading barbarians in its young. This is certainly the case in the radioactive hothouse of science fiction, where new literary generations arise once every five or so years to challenge the establishment with a new vision of how the stuff ought to be written. A careful scholar could trace these waves from Hugo Gernsback's original gang of engineer-savants onward, but a simple demonstration proof can begin in the mid-1960's, when Samuel Delany, Thomas Disch, R.A. Lafferty, Norman Spinrad, and Roger Zelazny imported the New Wave from England. In the early seventies, it was Ursula K. Le Guin, Barry Malzberg, Joanna Russ, James Tiptree, Jr., and Gene Wolfe. In the *mid*-seventies, it was Gregory Benford, Jack Dann, Gardner Dozois, Michael Bishop, Joe Haldeman, John Varley, and ... but more of them later. The significant point being that from the very beginning these changeovers have been accomplished with a certain amount of grumbling, screaming, firing off of

guns and fisticuffs in the hallways. It was either traditional, or a law of nature. No one was sure which.

The most extreme example of generational conflict came, of course, in the 1960's, when the controversy over the New Wave escalated to near-violence. On one side were the new writers entering the field who were not willing to abide its traditional restrictions (no graphic sex, a plain, "naturalistic" prose style, emphasis on idea to the exclusion of character) and on the other side their predecessors, suddenly labeled Old Wave, who objected to the new influences tainting their literary water hole (graphic sex, "experimental" prose, emphasis on mood or character to the exclusion of idea). Even today, when the positions of each side can be calmly discussed and evaluated—not here!—it is hard to understand why the debate got as acrimonious as it did, with each side vociferously denying the right of the other to even exist. Though Freud might have made some shrewd guesses.

In the 1980's, a new generation came into science fiction. This time, however, the army marched into the Eternal City and found it undefended. The lion gates were open; there were no archers on the walls. The citizenry turned out to throw flowers, and petty officials proffered the key to the city. The barbarians were dumbfounded. They'd spent years assembling their arms, perfecting their tactics, honing their skills, and they were spoiling for battle. They had to fight *some*one.

They looked at one another.

The generation I want to talk about hasn't been named yet. In this essay I'll call them the postmoderns, because it's a nonjudgmental term, and because it fairly reflects their unspoken belief that all science fiction leading up to and culminating in their generation is—let's face it—dead. All the postmoderns are talented, ambitious writers, steeped in the lore and history of the field, and the controversies of previous generations are old news to them, settled long ago and to their complete satisfaction. It's only natural that they would want to seize control of the future of science fiction, to plot its directions and aims and goals—this is exactly what all previous generations demanded and, more or less, got. But there are truths that can only be discovered in the heat of argument, and as writers they all knew that you can't generate excitement without conflict. A Revolution is no good without an active Opposition.

Fortunately, there was a natural division within the postmodern ranks.

The first group, the humanists, produce literate, often consciously literary fiction, focusing on human characters who are generally seen as frail and fallible, and using the genre to explore large philosophical questions, sometimes religious in nature. A short list of names would have to include Connie Willis, Kim Stanley Robinson, John Kessel, Scott Russell Sanders, Carter Scholz, and James Patrick Kelly.

The other group has been tagged the cyberpunks (a story in itself, but too long to re-tell here). Their fiction is stereotypically characterized by a fully-realized high-tech future, "crammed" prose, punk attitudes including antagonism to authority, and bright inventive details. They would have to include William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Lewis Shiner, Greg Bear, possibly Rudy Rucker, and sometimes Pat Cadigan.

Several streams of influence came together to form the cyberpunk thing. In the early seventies a group formed up that came to be known as the outlaw fantasists—Howard Waldrop, Steve Utley, Jake Saunders, Tom Reamy, a few others. They wrote truly strange fantasies marked by eclectic themes and outrageous ideas. Waldrop, for example, has written fantasies about dodoes, phlogiston, tractor pulls, telekinetic sumo wrestlers, and in one unforgettable flight of lunacy ("God's Hooks") had Izaak Walton and John Bunyan fishing in the Slough of Despond. *Nothing* seemed out of bounds to them, though, oddly enough, they rarely created high-tech futures. Since many of the outlaws lived in Texas, it was only natural that they should get together now and then, and the Turkey City Writers' Workshops brought in a wave of new young writers. Some, like Leigh Kennedy, became outlaw fantasists in their own right (witness her excellent and disturbing "Her Furry Face"). Others, like Shiner and Sterling, kept this wild sense of freedom, but mutated into something new.

The second major component is a kind of love-hate relationship with "hot tech," and here the track runs in and out of genre, from the high trash of A.E. Van Vogt and Charles Harness, through the 1950's future portrayed in *Popular Science* and *Popular Mechanics* (later satirized by Gibson in "The Gernsback Continuum"), the scat rhythms of Alfred Bester, corporate propaganda such as the 1964 World's Fair di-

oramas, the street-loner stance of Harlan Ellison, Japanese commercial art, the punk attitudes of John Shirley,[1] and the societal backlash against the sixties' antitechnological Arcadianism. Stir in strong doses of early Delany and Zelazny, a few out-of-genre writers, some Varley, a dollop of Stapledon, and you have the primal soup from which this new life form arose.

The humanists, on the other hand, have an easier, more immediate line of descent. They are the legitimate children of science fiction's "lost generation"—those post-New Wave writers of the seventies who have never been adequately celebrated or even examined collectively, and whom Tom Disch, in an article most of them found offensive, tagged "The Labor Day Group." This band would have to include George R.R. Martin, Ed Bryant, Vonda McIntyre, Joe Haldeman, Jack Dann, Elizabeth Lynn, Michael Bishop, Gardner Dozois, Greg Benford, and Joan Vinge. What they shared was a primary loyalty to science fiction and a belief that there is no argument between art and their chosen genre—that science fiction need not be written in oblique, metafictional *New York Review of Books* approved modes to be—really and truly—literature. (These writers are all still producing and in many cases turning out their best work to date, but the cutting edge of change has moved beyond them. In biological terms, they have donated their genetic material, and are now superfluous to our argument.)

To this direct influence the humanists bring a strong interest in outside literature, the high art "mainstream" stuff that outrages many of the pulp traditionalists (a group which, strange to say, includes several of the cyberpunks). John Kessel won a Nebula for "Another Orphan," a story which presupposes a certain familiarity with Melville's *Moby Dick*. Kim Stanley Robinson quoted Jean Paul Sartre—approvingly!—in "Green Mars." Is there anything better calculated to make the propeller beanie crowd gnash their teeth in outrage? I doubt it. I also doubt that this new generation is any more literate or better read than their progenitors. But where Martin, Bryant, *et al.* were too cagey (and perhaps too weary of the endless meaninglessness of the New Wave wars) to breathe their extrageneric influences aloud, the humanists stride forward with the fearless tread of angels.

1. I've listed Shirley as a literary ancestor where others would include him as a cyberpunk proper because he made his mark on the field years before any of the writers discussed here. His footprints are all over the cyberpunks' turf. It could be said that he serves as their John the Baptist figure.

What the postmoderns on both sides of the divide share in common is a confidence that borders on arrogance. They may like and even praise selected older writers (though they prefer 'em dead or obscure), but mostly they feel their predecessors are irrelevant, for good or for ill. "I hesitate to say it," Kessel is quoted in an interview in *Fantasy Review,* "but many of the works we call the best the field has to offer just do not measure up to the best of English and American fiction of the last couple of hundred years. Melville, Nabokov, Flannery O'Connor, Jane Austen, Faulkner, Conrad—these authors are a lot better, by almost any standard, than Herbert, Heinlein, Asimov, Zelazny and others." The science fiction writers mentioned would probably be surprised that anyone felt this statement needed to be made. And yet, you can tell, Kessel deplores the situation. "If we want to make it in the big leagues," he continues, "we've got to face big league pitching." Listen carefully and you can hear under his mild words the implicit brag that science fiction *can* make it in the big leagues, that it *can* face down Faulkner's spitball or Nabokov's sinker, and in his use of the first person plural, he reserves for himself a place in the batting lineup. This kind of ambition is alien to none of the postmoderns. They are all (and let's not lose sight of this fact) aiming high. They want to make it in the majors, and small fry like Heinlein, Asimov and Clarke are simply not the competition.

Commenting on this very phenomenon, James Patrick Kelly wrote of his fellow postmoderns, "It's ambition that makes them take the time to write killer short stories when they know that in practically the same amount of time and with less psychic effort they could cop a quick 10K for novelizing episodes of 'The Misfits of Science.' It's ambition that supports them as they stagger out of libraries laden with armloads of books that haven't been taken out since 1962. They're determined to stand out in this overcrowded field and they're willing to do the extra work." Which brings up another interesting topic, the curious mingling of respect and disdain with which the postmoderns approach their audience. They are willing to do that extra month's research it takes to establish that below-decks layout of a Spanish galleon or how Mozart actually spelled his middle name, for a story whose proceeds are not going to cover that month's food bill, because they know their readers care. And if their readers don't care, they can just go pound sand.

When the postmoderns entered the field, science fiction was in an uncharacteristically self-effacing state. As Sterling later put it, "SF was drifting without a rudder, at the mercy of every commercial breeze. New Wave had nothing to tell me. I'd grown up on it, and it was yellow and crisp around the edges, like an atticful of *New Worlds*." Nobody was fighting for the leading edge of SF. There was scattered chest-thumping and self-promotion, to be sure, but no organized cabals plotting the Overthrow and Destruction of Everything Sacred. The best writers were silent: The Old Wavers and New Wavers had by and large bludgeoned each other into critical quiescence. The Labor Day Group was either lying fallow (several of their best had written very little in recent years) or working on large, serious books that they hoped would break them either out of the genre or into major critical acclaim. (George R.R. Martin's *Fevre Dream* and Michael Bishop's *No Enemy But Time* are works of this period.) The guards were absent from their posts and the security systems had been shorted out. The starship's control room was vacant. Soft lights flickered, and the instrument panels hummed gently to themselves, waiting for somebody's guiding hand.

It was 1980. The children pushed open the door and stood blinking, a little bit afraid, in the sudden light.

As the postmoderns began their careers, they engaged in a frenzy of influence swapping and alliance forming. Here the cyberpunks stole an early march, forming themselves into as tight a clique as the field had seen since the Futurians, while the humanists were still gosh-wowing at the mere fact of being allowed to play with the Big Kids at all. Later, the pseudonymous Vincent Omniaveritas would launch his single-sheet Xerox®ed fanzine *Cheap Truth,* the *de facto* propaganda organ of the cyberpunk movement. Aggressively uncopyrighted and mailed free to whomever Vincent thought should read it, it was to prove remarkably influential. (Its opening words, "As American SF lies in a reptilian torpor, its small, squishy cousin, Fantasy, creeps gecko-like across the bookstands," both put the challenge to the status quo, and demonstrated Vince's talent for invective. When he raises his arms to call down anathema upon the unworthy, toads fall from the sky.) In the meantime, both the proto-cyberpunks and the humanists-to-be were meeting, workshopping, and, in furies of creativity, hammering together the prose machines with which to take the asylum by storm.

But artistic satisfaction is not enough if your ambitions aspire to the reformation and redirection of all science fiction. Influence is not achieved without recognition and even popularity, and a way of keeping score was needed. The best-of-the-year anthologies were too easy, and the Hugos, which largely depend on pre-existing popularity, were too hard. Much of the cyberpunk-humanist wars would be slugged out in the Nebula Award banquets of the next few years.

While our aspirant writers are busy producing the stories they hope will reshape the future, let's take a quick look at two of them, both humanists:

In some ways Connie Willis is the most subversive of the lot, refusing to give in to the bohemian conventions of the field, even to her defiantly normal appearance (shortly after she won two Nebulas in a single year, there was a tempest-in-a-teapot controversy over whether a Nebula winner should be *allowed* to wear Peter Pan collars). Interviewed in *Mile High Futures,* she admitted to attending church, and said that she got some of her best ideas from adult Sunday School classes. In a field that is still defending Galileo from Urban VIII, and producing thinly-disguised attacks on the Spanish Inquisition, this is heresy of the first magnitude. She also started out by writing for the women's confession magazines, and is not only unashamed of the experience, but claims to have learned useful skills from it.

Willis' prose is notable for her use of characterization by plotting and the sparsity of physical description. This gives a Willis story a unique and recognizable look and is in its own right an interesting technique. Also notable is that no two of her stories are alike. Willis is deliberately stretching her range, from the traditional realism of "Fire Watch" through such fairytale retellings as "The Father of the Bride" and the screwball comedy of "Blued Moon." It will be a long time, if ever, before she lets herself be restricted to a single type of story.

John Kessel is tall and quiet, with a large, dark mustache and an oxymoronic smile that manages to be both shy and confident at the same time. He has a Ph.D. from the University of Kansas and is an Assistant Professor of English at North Carolina State University. This, he has said, gives him the freedom to write whatever he likes, even in defiance of popular tastes, since he needn't rely on his writing to keep him alive. Despite a baccalaureate in both English and Physics, his work is almost exclusively fantasy. It is, however, a fantasy that is not interested so much

in the fantastic as in the human reactions to it. In "The Lecturer," for example, a teacher becomes interested in a strange living statue that stands on campus engaged in an endless (and perfectly dull) lecture, and finds that nobody—even, ultimately, himself—wants to face up to the fact that this is simply *not natural.* The statue is never explained.

Kessel's output, while influential, is not large, and much of it has been written in collaboration with James Patrick Kelly. The bulk of their collaborations were conceived as parts of a whole and make up their novel *Freedom Beach.*

The mere existence of Willis and Kessel was enough to annoy cyberpunk sensibilities. The fact that they were writing strong stories in competition for the same limited number of awards, limited niches in *Omni*[2] (which offers a word rate that a writer could almost live on, if they only bought more stories), and the same limited amount of popular and critical attention, made them a menace.

The humanists may not have been as well organized, but the first blood went to them. In 1982 they won the first Nebulas. John Kessel took Novella with "Another Orphan," and Connie Willis took both Novelette and Short Story for "Fire Watch" and "A Letter From the Clearys." A little later "Fire Watch" also won a Hugo. It was a clean sweep for the humanists. (Novel went to Michael Bishop, but since neither faction had anything up in that category, this was irrelevant.) Worse, "Fire Watch" beat out "Burning Chrome" by Gibson and "Swarm" by Sterling. What made this all but unbearable is that these latter were not just good stories, but major works that were seen in many quarters as instant classics, and the cyberpunks were not likely to be writing better soon. They had gone into the fray with their best, and they had lost.

Vincent Omniaveritas cranked the *Cheap Truth* propaganda machine up high. Demanding across-the-board reforms, he snarled: "It is little wonder that rock videos, like Napoleon, have pulled SF's crown from the gutter and placed it on their own head. Movement, excitement, color, reckless visionary drive: you will find these in abundance in the work of video directors and bands raised from birth on SF. Consequently they are producing not only excellent SF but SF often better

2. Here too, the cyberpunks got in their groundwork early, finding a warm welcome in *Omni*'s pages. For a time, in fact, fiction editor Ellen Datlow was known, for her support of the group in general and her discovery of William Gibson in particular, as "the queen of punk SF."

than that in the written media." And, getting down to cases, Sue Denim wrote, "This year's Nebula ballot looked like a list of stuff that Mom and Dad said it was okay to read." Not long after, reviewing the Dozois Best of the Year anthology from Bluejay Books (in which Dozois singled out the "'80's generation" for praise, and listed its members), Omniaveritas wrote, "If these heirs-designate were dropped into a strong magnetic field, Gibson, Shiner, Sterling, Cadigan, and Bear would immediately drift to one pole ... Robinson, Kessel, Kelly, Murphy, and Willis would take the other." This was the moment of schism. Sides had been chosen, names dropped, and the battle could commence.

This hotted-up phase of the campaign lasted for the next few years. But before leaving 1982, let's take a quick look at two more postmoderns, both cyberpunks this time.

Bill Gibson bears a striking resemblance to Elvis Costello, but is much taller; like Costello, he is seen by his supporters as working right at the artistic edge, a position they deem virtuous in and of itself. As of 1982, his already formidable reputation was based on exactly two stories, "Burning Chrome" and "Johnny Mnemonic," both published in *Omni*. (He'd written a few other stories, mostly minor, but they brought him little attention—though no opprobrium either.) Sooner or later he would have to write a novel, and there was a certain tension to the question of whether he could carry the magic over into the greater and more demanding length.

Gibson's work is quintessential cyberpunk, with the hottest of technological futures, fast action, tight construction, and a disdain for all that is slow and boring. He has been acclaimed as a new breed of hard science fictioneer, a laurel he gracefully declined in an interview for *Interzone:* "I think that a number of reviewers have mistaken my sense of realism, of the *commercial surfaces* of characters' lives for some deep and genuine attempt to understand technology. I'm as fascinated—well, a bit more so, actually—by what motivates someone to go out and buy a pair of Calvin Klein jeans as I am by the workings of a surgical laser. Which is not to say that I am blind to the beauty and importance (or the poetry) of surgical lasers ..." In all the excitement it would be easy to overlook the fact that he's an exacting craftsman and stylist on the small scale—line by line—as well as the large, a writer who can join two phrases seamlessly and with a swipe of the chamois make them glitter darkly. He was universally seen as the cyberpunks' big threat, their Babe

Ruth, the Moses who was going to lead them out of the literary wastes and into the promised land of New and Better Science Fiction.

Bruce Sterling has already, in his short career, had three literary incarnations. First as a promising, largely ignored young writer (his first novel, *Involution Ocean,* a Harlan Ellison Discovery Series book, was ... well, promising and largely ignored). Following *The Artificial Kid,* a now-rare hardcover in which he broke through into (and possibly invented) cyberpunk, he emerged as the suddenly hot writer of the Shapers/Mechanists Factions stories, which combined pulp sensibilities and plotting, Stapledonian perspective, and cyberpunk incandescence. "Swarm" was a Factions story, and one of the best of them. After the publication of *Schismatrix,* his culminative Factions novel, in 1985, he moved into a third stage as a slick and quirky literary stylist, in stories (such as "Telliamed," "The Greening of Brunei," and "Dinner in Audoghast") which retain the color and excitement of cyberpunk, but move beyond it into something new. In his chameleonic incarnations, this shamanistic skin-shedding trick makes him by far the most interesting postmodern to watch, just to see what surprises come next.

It was 1983. The battle lines were drawn. And a surprising new ally presented himself. Greg Bear, who had been laboring in the promising-and-largely-ignored vineyards for several years, suddenly found his voice, and published two stories ("Hardfought" and "Blood Music") which in their bright inventiveness, bold daring, and cheerful pessimism were—there was no getting around it—cyberpunk. Working in perfect isolation from the faction, Bear had independently invented the cyberpunks' style, and they loved him for it. He was welcomed to the ranks with open arms.

At the same time, the cyberpunks saw a new threat shaping up, a writer who seemed to them the most talented and menacing of all the humanists, Kim Stanley Robinson.

Kim Stanley Robinson has the cold glitter of a gunslinger to him, the kind of contained look that makes rivals nervous. To see him and Gibson talking together, even in photographs, is to be struck that there is much that these two are *not* saying to each other, that there are killer truths hiding just beneath the skin. Robinson combined high literary sensibilities (I've heard an editor who missed signing him up try to shrug him off as obviously being a mainstream art writer who didn't yet realize he was just passing through SF on the way to bigger things) with a

strong, lucid prose style. He'd already gotten critical attention with stories ("At the North Pole of Pluto," "Exploring Fossil Canyon," and "Venice Drowned," for example) that combined topnotch writing and traditional science fiction themes pushed that little bit further. In 1983 he published "Black Air," a novella about a young boy dragooned into the Spanish Armada. It was about suffering and mercy, the writing was so good you could taste the North Atlantic, the underlying mysticism all worked, and to the cyberpunks it was infuriating. "It's so nice to read a straightforward historical story, just like that Frank G. Slaughter used to write," Sue Denim hissed in *Cheap Truth,* "and it's just too bad he had to tack on that fantasy mumbo jumbo at the end just so he could sell it."

"Black Air" won the World Fantasy Award for 1983, and once again the humanists had stolen a march on the cyberpunks. Another major award had fallen to the enemy. That same year Bear left the Nebula ceremonies with two awards, for "Blood Music" and "Hardfought," and while this was a moral victory and an encouraging sign that the Right Stuff might yet win through, it was not enough. Bear was only an honorary cyberpunk; he had earned a place in the ranks through sheer merit, much as he had earned his Nebulas. He was not part of the cabal that had labored late into the dark night of obscurity, shivering in unheated garages to create cyberpunk and make it work. The victory they wanted so bad they could taste it, their vindication, could not be obtained that easily.

1984, and the trenches were manned. Terry Carr was editing the revitalized Ace Specials line for Susan Allison at the Berkley Publishing Group, and he shrewdly managed to line up many of the most promising new writers. The lineup of the first five books contained the conflict in miniature. It led off with Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Wild Shore,* followed by Lucius Shepard's *Green Eyes,* William Gibson's *Neuromancer,* Carter Scholz and Glenn Harcourt's *Palimpsests,* and Howard Waldrop's *Them Bones.* These books got a lot of serious attention, most of it favorable, and there was much year's end discussion of the New Generation of writers, and where they might lead SF.

(Carter Scholz, who has not been discussed previous to this, belongs firmly in the humanist camp. He is the most defiantly intellectual of the lot, and this has to a certain degree slowed down his career.

And yet works like his screamingly funny "The Nine Billion Names of God"—knowledgeable readers will realize that the joke begins with the title—show that he is out there on the literary intellectual outposts not through ignorance or inability but by choice.)

Robinson was first out of the gate. In *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, Algis Budrys wrote, "Kim Stanley Robinson ... is an uncommonly gifted writer. But he is also an uncommon sort of writer for our whereabouts, and therefore it's notable to me that Terry Carr and Ace, in re-instituting the Ace Special series, waited until they had his novel to begin the series with. They literally did that—there are other books in the Special inventory, from other new and promising writers, that waited for Robinson to deliver *The Wild Shore*."[3] The novel itself fulfilled John W. Campbell's dream of a literature as it might be written by somebody in the future in which the story is set (though it's doubtful what JWC would have made of this *particular* fulfillment). It is a classical *Bildungsroman,* a gentle, almost introspective exploration of a boy's growth to manhood and the beginnings of wisdom, within an enigmatic post-Collapse America. It defies and plays against the expectations of the genre adventure novel, even including within itself a parody of the book it could have been. (There is an unforgettable and telling moment during a public reading of this supposedly non-fiction work, when the adults can no longer hold in their laughter, and fall to the ground, howling, great tears of mirth rolling down their cheeks, while the children glare at them angrily.) It was received with critical and popular acclaim.

When the dust settled, the cyberpunks realized that this was their showdown at last. William Gibson was marching slowly down Main Street, gun at thigh, to face down Kim Stanley Robinson. It was *Neuromancer* against *The Wild Shore.* Cyberpunk versus humanist. It was High Noon.

To read *Cheap Truth* from this period, it's fairly obvious that the cyberpunks expected another defeat. It wasn't just that Budrys and Ace had already crowned Robinson king. *Neuromancer* was simply too good, too far ahead of its time. It was destined to be defeated by the purblind provincialism of the field.

3. In fact, Budrys was mistaken about this, according to Kim Stanley Robinson. Robinson notes that his novel was not originally supposed to lead off the line, but was hastily shoved forward when the scheduled lead novel was not received in time.

Tensions ran high. "The 1985 Nebula Awards will be handed out on May 4," Sue Denim wrote, "fifteen years to the day from the shootings at Kent State University in Ohio. Once again the armed might of conservatism faces the radical vision of a new generation, this time across the distance of a ballot," and she vowed, "Political oppression breeds revolution. For every Heinlein that smites a Gibson, thousands more will rise in his place."

If for no other reason than to preserve dramatic pacing and properly draw out suspense, it's best we pause here to look quickly at several other writers who play significant roles in our narrative. In the humanist camp, we have yet to introduce James Patrick Kelly, whose work has been largely overshadowed by that of his collaborator, John Kessel. It would be a mistake to overlook him. A quiet man who has been known to wear three-piece suits to science fiction conventions, Kelly has an exceptionally lucid prose style, employing what Kessel calls "the kind of skill that hides skill." This is not only a tough style to attain but a brutal one to have mastered, since it leaves the writer with not a florid adjective to hide behind. He has written some first-rate hardcore humanist stories (notably, "The Empty World," which is about an encounter with Emily Brontë) and is also getting attention for his trilogy of stories, "Solstice," "Rat," and "The Prisoner of Chillon." Of which, more soon.

Scott Russell Sanders makes no strong distinctions between his genre and mainstream writings. In his words, "I write what I feel like writing, in whatever form or mode seems appropriate, and then agents and editors have to worry about how to publish and market it." This is the voice of a generation; none of the postmoderns are overconcerned about writing to expectations. However, where others feel this freedom in principle, he puts it into practice writing everything from *Wonders Hidden* (an "historical" about Audubon) through the science fictional *Terrarium*, into the non-fiction *Stone Country* (with photographer Jeffrey A. Wolin, a study of Indiana limestone and the men who cut it, in history and lore). In his SF story "Ascension," the husband of the mayor of a small town suffering from mass insomnia retreats into a surplus space suit, there to sleep and await his symbolic transcendence. (And what, one wonders, would John W. Campbell have made of *that?*)

On the cyberpunk side, Rudy Rucker, the third of their Big Guns, strays farther from consensus reality than any of the other postmoderns,

producing work strongly reminiscent of what Henry Kuttner once published under the name of Lewis Padgett. A mathematician by training (he has written popular books on the subject), he pulls off admirably zany excesses with great nonchalance. His novels in particular (*Clear White Light, Master of Time and Space,* and *Software* leap to mind) have earned him an enthusiastic following. Comparing his text to that of his cohort, one has to sadly conclude that he is *sui generis,* no cyberpunk at all, but rather a one-man subgenre all by himself. However, the cyberpunks love him for his daring, excess, and clear-eyed craziness, and have claimed him as one of their own.

Lewis Shiner has thus far rested in the shadow of the Big Three—his first novel, *Frontera,* in an almost allegorical juxtaposition, landed on the Nebula ballot opposite Gibson—but he was a strong writer to begin with, and shows constant growth. Lately he seems to be coming more and more into his own voice with such stories as "Till Human Voices Wake Us," the well-received "The War at Home," and his crisp, unforgiving look at working-class failure, "Jeff Beck." If you strip away the fantastic element from his work (he likes dealing with outré belief systems, such as those of Aleister Crowley or current particle physics), what remains is a particularly vivid brand of realism. Finally, it has been charged that Pat Cadigan, while a fine writer, is no cyberpunk at all. (She has also been called "the Dorothy Parker of science fiction," but that's another can of terms entirely, and one we won't open.) And while stories like "Roadside Rescue" (which is, if anything, Outlaw Fantasy) support this contention, her Pathosfinder stories and the hard-edged grittiness of "Rock On" and "Pretty Boy Crossover" put her firmly—if only occasionally—among the cyberpunks. When she veers into fantasy, however, she often displays the keenest, and occasionally meanest, sense of humor of any of the postmoderns, excepting only Rucker.

Which brings us back to the 1984 Nebulas, and William Gibson's climactic showdown. His weapon was a novel that "eroticizes computers the way that Bruce Springsteen eroticizes cars" (here I'm quoting his publisher's publicity sheet), and he didn't expect it to find a large audience. But Nebula Fever strikes where it will, and as the date approached, his followers had their secret hopes. Adrenaline flowed, nerves stretched the breaking point, palms grew sweaty and …

Neuromancer took everything with embarrassing ease. It not only won the Nebula for best novel, but the Philip K. Dick award for best

paperback original, and the Hugo award as well. At the same time, it was garnering overwhelmingly positive reviews both in and out of genre, in everything from *Amazing* to the *Whole Earth Review*. Even the *New York Times* gave it a rave, though it waited over a year to do so, and then (in their recommended Christmas reading list) got the plot wrong. It was an unprecedented triumph for a first novel, the kind that every writer dreams of yet dares not hope for. And Gibson got it all.

This success threw the ranks into disarray. The cyberpunks were left all alone in the middle of the battlefield, enemy in full retreat, the spoils before them, the acknowledged New Direction of SF all theirs, and they were barely winded. Without warning, they were victorious.

It was just too damned easy.

The fight hadn't been as much fun as they'd expected. And the result? Virtue *rewarded?* It was as if they'd found themselves suddenly transported into the middle of a Christian allegory; the fact that one of their number had been cast as the Pilgrim made it no more palatable. In *Cheap Truth,* Candace Barragus proceeded to trash Gibson, writing "There is little true anger in *Neuromancer* or in punk rock. The rest is posturing, and finally rings hollow … If SF is to give us new lands, it will have to try harder than this. *Neuromancer* has little thought in it—surely the old corporate-run future, with Japanese electro-dominance, can't be counted on as a new idea?—but much attention to the cosmetics of a time only slightly beyond our own." But while Ms. Barragus (who, to judge by prose styles, is probably not Gibson himself, though that is an attractive possibility) spelled out several valid (but irrelevant) flaws in the novel, nobody rose to the bait. It seemed they had not an enemy in the world. Victory was complete.

In the aftermath, everybody was left feeling vaguely dissatisfied. A new generation of cyberpunks—identifiable by their prose, but nobody that anybody had ever *met*—was coming up. The cyberpunks had created a subgenre that was easy to imitate, and they couldn't help but wonder if somehow they shouldn't have aimed higher. It was around this time that Sterling said resignedly, "I don't worry much about the future of razor's edge Techno-punk. It will be bowdlerized and parodied and reduced to a formula, just as all other SF has been." Revolutions cannot survive this kind of total success, and at this point, whether they knew it or not (and most of them did not) cyberpunk as a movement was dead.

But if the factions were no more, the postmoderns remained. Everybody shifted literary position a little. Nobody, after all, was really *happy* with their labels. By now the cyberpunks had a rep as flash stylists, but weak on character, and the humanists were deemed good with people, but a trifle lacking in idea content. Both judgments were unfair, but they still left everyone wondering what to do next, and full of energy. Across the ranks, there was movement, as people stretched their literary muscles. James Patrick Kelly made an abrupt stylistic veer into the flash and pyrotechnic display of his "Cyberpunk Trilogy" (the aforementioned "Solstice," "Rat," and "The Prisoner of Chillon") and, three-piece suit or not, they were *good.* Lewis Shiner moved more and more into a lean, sinewy prose style that owed little to cyberpunk proper. Kim Stanley Robinson, whose *The Wild Shore* and *Icehenge* had both been received enthusiastically by critics and readers alike, moved on to new works (and also, temporarily, to Switzerland for reasons unrelated to science fiction). John Kessel and Bruce Sterling decided to collaborate on a story. Pat Cadigan put out a final issue of her highly-regarded fanzine *Shayol,* and went merrily on her way with her own idiosyncratic mix of fantasy and SF. Out of a clear blue sky, Rudy Rucker wrote *The Meaning of Life,* which under its ornamentation is a gently self-satirical look at growing up in the sixties. Sterling put his Factions stories behind him, and revealed himself as a master stylist. Many of his new works are an attempt to explore the impact of science in a way free of the technolatry characteristic of current Utopian and Distopian SF. A belated *rapprochement* was in the works. New alliances were forming, and new constellations of writers, and they were all casting about for a new challenge. Something bigger this time.

But in the midst of all this carnage and triumph, art and defeat, something significant happened. Another postmodern popped up. Lucius Shepard, whose Ace Special novel *Green Eyes* (a weird combination of biochemistry and voodoo) had been largely ignored at first, suddenly blossomed. In 1983, he had published his first story, "Solitario's Eyes." Now in 1984 he produced what seemed an endless stream of excellent stories, including the darkly savage "Salvador." By year's end, he had three stories on the Nebula ballot, and while he did not win *then,* everybody knew it was just a matter of time.

Shepard is another damned tall writer—to stand in conversation with him, Gibson, and Kessel, is to guarantee a stiff neck the next morn-

ing. He wears a silver skull in one ear, and has a possibly romantic past about which everyone seems to know something, but not much. He almost certainly *has* traveled extensively about the world, to judge by the convincing quality of his varied and exotic settings. He has also met genuine lowlife—a type that SF writers often tackle, and usually miss—again by testimony of such stories as "Black Coral" and "A Traveler's Tale." Often he writes from a Third World perspective, something very few Americans dare even attempt.

What is significant to our account is that Shepard belongs in neither cyberpunk nor humanist camps. His fiction has the mean edge of the cyberpunks, and the human angle of the humanists, and yet lacks the hot tech ambiance of the one, and the defiant literariness of the other. Still, Shepard intuitively belongs with the postmoderns. So, rather than try to shoehorn him into either badly-fitting label, let's just see him as symptomatic of the new surge of writers coming up from obscurity. The ground is bubbling underfoot, and new talent is climbing into the sunshine. The cutting edge is about to move on. Some who have it now will lose it, and others will keep it. Reputations will grow and dwindle. Some will almost but never quite make it. Others will linger in the shadows for years before bursting out to dazzle us all. The mighty shall be humbled, and the humble exalted. All Biblical prophesies shall be fulfilled. In short, it will be a time much like any other for science fiction.

Looking back over what I've written, I regret all the significant writers I've had to leave out in the interest of simplification. No discussion of our literary time and place would be complete, for example, without mention of the Bay Area group of Philip K. Dick disciples that includes Tim Powers, K.W. Jeter, and the infinitely strange James Blaylock. I've also neglected the gang of Space Cadets—the ones Omniaveritas calls "Reagan Youth"—who have accreted about the twin nuclei of Jim Baen and Jerry Pournelle. I've skipped over all the lone wolf writers for lack of a convenient niche (where does one place Jack McDevitt, Nancy Kress, Pat Murphy, Tim Sullivan, or Gregory Frost, to name just five?). Finally, and I regret this most but it was done out of ignorance rather than malice, I haven't said a word about the writers (R.A. MacAvoy, John Crowley, Patricia McKillip, Michael Shea, Jane Yolen, Robin McKinley, and of course, Tanith Lee) currently at work to shape the new fantasy. To all of them, and you, I apologize.

Ah, but for a dazzling instant there, it was possible to see it all: To choose up sides, name names and list lists. The lines of literary influence were exposed for all to see, bright as lasers across the literary map, running from Texas to British Columbia, from New Hampshire to North Carolina, with nexuses in Denver, in Austin, in Kansas City, in Philadelphia even, and for that single bright instant before the continents shifted, the future was laid out sparkling and clean, the roads were clear, and the gateways into brave new words of fiction swung wide. All of Atlantis was prosperous and at peace.

It was a terrific time to be alive and young and writing stories so good that they made the competition slam fists into walls and throw typewriters through closed windows in blind fits of jealous rage.

Ships
by
Michael Swanwick and Jack Dann

I was dead.

That before all: I was dead and buried. Time passed and I took no notice of it. My body rotted. The vermin of the earth came and feasted upon my flesh.

It was then that my third eye opened up. An area in the center of my wallet-brown skull seemed to melt, and my questing vision stared upward, seeing through the coffin, through the soil, through the roots of the grass above, seeing as clearly as ever I had when I was alive.

I knew my mind's eye was blue, though I could not say how I knew. Perhaps it was some sort of sympathetic magic, for I was staring at a clear blue sky that curved above me, flawless as the finest example of the ceramist's art. And though I well knew where I lay, I felt that I was at long last home.

I could remember my funeral, the incense, the last screams of … Anastasia? A woman, definitely. I could feel the wood and silk of the bier beneath me, mountains pressing upon me, even as the darkness swirled like wind, like smoke. I lay detached and emotionless, my thoughts slowly dissolving with death and my senses numbing into a synesthesia of color and sadness and memory and sound and—

Then here. Blue eye. Open.

As the ships came toward me, skimming over sand, blowing slight tails in the dunes.

A kind of lightness seized me, lifting me up into the blue mirror of my eye. It was as if God had hooked a finger under my chin and held me dangling over the shimmering, the oceanic surface of my old life.

I waited.

The nearest of the ships, a three-decked frigate of a hundred guns, hove to, kicking up a light spray of the golden sand. I thought I felt a grain or two strike my face. The creatures aboard the ship—demons? angels?—crowded the rails and hung from the shrouds. A thin, almost skeletal figure stood on the raised quarter-deck, looking-glass tucked under his arm.

With a pang of what emotion I now cannot say, I recognized him.

It was me. What I was seeing was either a doppelganger, a ghost … or else the real Auberon Chang.

For an instant, I felt a vertiginous turning, so that I became the other Auberon Chang, standing aboard the frigate, and I thought his thoughts, scanned the dunes with his baleful eyes, saw *me*. Our shared imagination quailed at the sight. He saw an open grave, violated brown bones, maggots caught as if in the webs of a hundred spiders. But the webbing was rotting musculature, and my skull was eyeless, for eyes were to the small workmen of the soil a delicacy beyond even flesh. Thoughts turned to darkness, emptiness, and when I awakened (as myself, as the Captain of this impossible ship) I found myself on the forward deck, looking out into the starry darkness.

The sands were far behind us. Incredibly, we were sailing in the ebon blackness of space. The stars were so sharp and bright, so hot and cold in their redness and demon-fire blues that it hurt the eye to look into them. And below, far below, the earth rotated like a blue dream, or a last thought.

"Sir! Permission to approach."

I turned, middle fingers linked behind my back, and nodded to the crewman waiting by the mainmast. He came to me, hauling by the scruff of its neck a wretched thing, pallid and afraid, but still undeniably human. *The cabin-boy,* whispered a voice in my head.

"This'n here was caught stealing food, sir."

The cabin-boy twisted his head around suddenly, snorted as if to clear his throat, and spat at me. It was a shocking gesture, wild and suicidal. Wiping my face in disgust, I could not but admire him for it.

"Take him aft," I said (and all the while thinking how pathetic a being this less-than-mannikin was, what a horrid existence he must lead, how deserving he was of compassion). "Have him hanged."

The hanging was held as a formal discipline, with a color guard and three drummers. The crew was assembled to watch as four demon sailors pulled the creature kicking and struggling into the air. They hauled on a rope that ran through a block-and-tackle hung from the fore yardarm and with each smooth motion the cabin-boy was jerked another yard higher. His hands had been tied behind his back. His face darkened from red to blue, a knot of agony. It was a gruesome sight.

"Enjoying yourself, Captain?"

I turned into the grinning, many-toothed face of the first mate. *Starbuck,* my interior voice whispered, *a most dangerous subordinate.* "State your business, sir," I said coldly.

His smirk retreated from his face, but lingered beneath the skin, like a hyena waiting just beyond the lion's reach. "We've passed the beacon star, sir. It's time you opened our orders."

"I'll be the judge of that, Mr. Starbuck."

"Yes, sir."

"Have you so little to occupy your time, Mr. Starbuck, that you must involve yourself in second-guessing your superior? Do the men find your supervision wholly superfluous?"

An involuntary snarl distorted Starbuck's narrow face before he could hide it with a bow. Chastened, he made his respects and backed away.

The cabin-boy's struggles were more desperate now. He had turned black, and blood poured from his nostrils—it made him seem a minor goblin. He could not die, of course—not here, not now—and so it was possible to extend his punishment as long as desired. Forever, if necessary.

"Cut him down," I said at last. "You know where to send him."

When I returned to my quarters, three bells later, the cabin-boy was awaiting me. His eyes were red with hate, but he made no protest as I turned him around and pulled his ragged trousers from his smooth

young flanks. He allowed me to bend him over the cot submissively enough, and made only a single gurgling noise—a whimper, almost—when I entered him.

I took my pleasure of him.

When I had slaked my lust, I poured water in a basin and laved my privates. Then I adjusted my clothing. The cabin-boy pulled up his rags and watched sullen and unblinking as I opened the ship's safe and removed the packet of instructions under which we sailed. It had been sealed in red wax with the Sigil of Baphomet. I tapped the parchment bundle thoughtfully against my lips.

"Brandy!" I snapped. "And then get out!"

Alone, I sprawled in the Captain's chair—mine was the only berth in the ship afforded this dignity—and drank deep from a cut-crystal tumbler. The liquor was as brown as amber and as delicious as old sins recalled in tranquillity.

I broke the seal.

The orders were brief and to the point. Nevertheless I studied them for a long time. Though I had long been expecting something of the sort, and had indeed argued for it in clandestine councils, still it was a shock to come upon the moment itself.

"Here it is, then," I murmured.

With sudden resolution I strode up on deck. "Starbuck!" I shouted. This was too great a moment for the master-of-arms, a sailing master, or indeed any officer of lesser rank than he. "Assemble the crew!"

He materialized at my elbow. "Twice in one watch? It's not good discipline, sir." Eyes glittering with an avaricious hunger for me to show weakness or indecision. But I had a trick up my sleeve worth two of his.

"Bugger discipline! Line 'em up and serve out three tots of rum-and-sulfur for every man-jack of them."

"Three!" Starbuck cried in involuntary amazement.

"Do it now, sir," I said quietly.

In minutes the crew was assembled in crude, undisciplined ranks before the mainmast. Their grog was served out, and this effectively divided their attention between curiosity and anxiety for the devilish liquor they knew better than to drink before my command to do so. At my direction, Midshipman Coffin stood by the mast. The cabin-boy deposited a small chest at my feet.

"Mister Coffin!" I barked. "Strike the colors."

Demon mouths fell open in amazement, revealing arched rows of pointed teeth, fangs, tusks the hue of old ivory. Tattooed faces turned upward, aghast. A Babel of hoarse whispers arose from all sides. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Starbuck's hand surreptitiously close around the hidden dagger he thought I didn't know about. The silk flag of the Old Order floated gracefully down, as white and delicate as a hanky dropped from an old lady's hand. From the chest I'd had removed from my cabin I drew forth new colors. Up they went.

The crew stared up at the banner under whose aegis we now sailed. It was as black and featureless as the black flag of anarchy. But the black of *our* flag held an infinitely more fearsome meaning.

A horror-struck silence descended upon the ship. Before it could break, I held out my hand. The cabin-boy placed in it a leather cup identical to those the crew themselves held. I raised it in a formal toast.

"Blood and damnation! Fuck the grail."

I drained the thing in one gulp.

It took an effort to maintain my countenance, for the drink came from Hell's own cellars and was fit only for the degraded palates of such as sailed before the mast. But somehow I managed to keep a granite face. And the crew, nothing loath for a drink upon any occasion, knocked their own back.

While they were gasping and wheezing and laughing, I raised an eyebrow at Starbuck. He nodded to Coffin, who jumped atop the taffrail and whipped off his hat. "Hip-hip—" he cried.

"Huzzah!" the crew roared.

"Hip-hip—"

"Huzzah!"

"Hip-hip—"

"Huzzah!"

I allowed myself a tight little smile of satisfaction. The moment when the men might have turned against me was past. They were mongrel curs to their very bones, with a cur's mentality: to attack upon show of weakness and to fawn and grovel before the hand that wielded the whip. I had acted with the high-handed assurance of a master of beasts. There would be no mutiny. My command was safe.

And we were rebels now.

Fuck the grail.

So began the great enterprise: With three cheers and a command to the steersman to abandon our prior course for a sharp veer into the starry wastes. Inevitably the first excitement of rebellion was swallowed up by the inescapable routines of duty, unchanged by our new status. Decks still needed swabbing, and sails trimming. Days, weeks, months, and years passed in the regular monotony of shipboard life, broken into dog-watches and the clocking tolling of bells and shrill of whistles. I grew to know and hate my officers and crew as intimately as they did me.

The strange transformation of the cabin-boy escaped my attention for so immoderately long a time that when I at last had my revelation, it was already undeniable in its nature.

It happened at the end of the third watch. I had seized the cabin-boy by the shoulders preparatory to entering him, and one hand slid forward and down to his chest, which I on occasion grasped and fondled during the act. Sliding under his loose tunic, it encountered what was unmistakably a woman's breast!

I drew back from him. He waited motionless, incurious.

"Strip," I commanded.

I watched avidly as he obeyed. In the gloom, he might have been mistaken for a slender woman. His hips had widened. He now had, as I have said, slight breasts. There had been a general shifting of fatty deposits. In other, less obvious ways he was no longer entirely male.

Wonderingly, I lit a lantern and scrutinized his body with care. There was an unforced femininity to his form and features. His neck was long and smooth. The gentle swell of his belly brought back ancient, longing memories. His penis, for which I had no use, had shriveled to the size of an infant's. He was all but hermaphroditic.

"How has this happened?" I demanded.

He shrugged. "It's what you wanted."

"Explain yourself!"

He gave me a look sharp as a fox's. "Yer the Captain and I'm just the cabin-boy. You want something—what'm I sposed to do? Might not want to obey. Ain't got no choice."

I questioned him further, but he was a creature of little intellect. I was the Captain and that meant I got my way. In his simple philosophy, that explained all. Still …

Was it possible? Had my desires—my *needs*—been slowly altering the creature in the course of the endless series of sodomies I visited

on his body? It seemed inevitable. Those same lusts that overmastered me, it would appear, were capable of overwhelming their object as well.

I laid him down on the cot upon his back for the first time and studied his form with a cold and unsympathetic eye. Then I entered him from between his legs, as I would have a woman.

"Let's get to work," I growled. "You have a long way to go."

Within the year, the creature was no longer male. Its hair had, at my insistence, been left uncut and hung halfway down its back. Its breasts, pale as alabaster and pink-tinged at the tips, were full as ripe pears, the skin fine to the point of translucency. Its vagina was a detailed work of art, identical in every respect to that of one particular woman from my long ago and otherwise forgotten past.

On the day when it was at last clear that no trace of its penis, of its maleness, remained, I asked a question I had never directed at it before. "Do you have a name?"

It shook its head, not meeting my eyes. I took its chin between thumb and forefinger and lifted its gaze to meet mine. The coals of rebellion glowed therein, as hotly banked as ever. That I had very carefully left unchanged.

"I will call you Anastasia."

She flushed, but said nothing.

"The body's done," I told her then. "Let's start working on the face."

Already I could see the ghost of a different set of features lying just beneath the skin, like the face of a drowned woman glimpsed through murky water.

From that night on, Anastasia lived in my cabin; and like an artist who, knowing that a Madonna resides within the stone he's working, chips away blindly until he 'finds' the form residing there, so did I mold her features, sometimes with fornications and sometimes with curses and beatings. I knew not what I wanted until the features manifested themselves in a series of tiny miracles of the flesh: Pale blue eyes flecked with silver, hair as black as obsidian, a swarthy complexion. A narrow, aquiline nose and high cheekbones combined with a full mouth and a heart-shaped face to give her the appearance of a feral saint, the obscene sweetness of an angel blessed—or cursed—with free will.

She lay beside me when I slept, and upon awakening I would examine her to see what had changed, what had become defined, what had become more perfect, for her journey was to nothing less than perfection. Long before she was done, she was so beautiful that it hurt me to look upon her.

I talked with her for hours, teaching her to respond as Anastasia herself would. I gave her warmth and intelligence and a certain calculating curiosity. I gave her a smile so bewitching it made me want to wrap my hands lovingly about her throat and choke her senseless. I formed her mind as carefully as I did her body.

When she accompanied me topside, the crew would stare at her with the flat, cannibalistic gaze of a hungry rat considering its own children. She held herself stiffly then, chin high, trying in vain to hide her fear from me. She was never—never!—more deliciously desirable to me than she was then. Back in my cabin, I would take her while the terror still flowed from her body in great waves of pheromones.

I was living in a fool's paradise.

The watches passed, the men rotating like the dark hands of a clock that was the frigate itself, measuring out the futile parsecs of eternity. We sailed beyond the final dim stars of existence and into the void beyond. And there came at last a day when a thin line of light appeared in the distance, almost impossible to see, bisecting the universe.

The cliffs of Heaven.

The cliffs grew, incandescent white and brighter than any sun, for month upon month. By imperceptible degrees they towered so high over the ships that their tops could not be seen without looking up. Sunglasses were doled out to all the crew, and even so the cliffs could not be looked at directly for long without the eyes watering.

The mere sight of that ancient stronghold of the great Enemy sent the crew into frenzies of loathing. In their emotional state they committed even more atrocities than usual. Disciplines, floggings, torturings, became a daily entertainment. Yet, "We're detecting no more than one crime in ten," Starbuck reported.

"Then punish 'em ten times over for those you do."

Black specks against the more-than-Arctic dazzle, the gathering fleets were at first no more significant than a swarm of midges set upon attacking a continent.

But as more and more ships joined the gathering, by the dozens at first, and then the hundreds, congregating into the thousands and millions, the brightness diminished. We grew into the billions, and became a great cloud, a storm, and still we grew, into the trillions and beyond. Our numbers surpassed comprehension. The wave of hatred that preceded us was like a great fist smashing into Heaven's face. The cliffs cracked and shattered, crumbling, into the void even before we reached them.

By the time we passed the coastline our Armada seemed not just a threat but Fate itself.

Midshipman Coffin had good reason to believe that he would not prosper were Starbuck first-in-command. So it was he I chose to operate the capstan that lowered me in a rope-and-basket contraption alongside Sophonisba, the frigate's painted figurehead. She was an enormous carving, three times my own height, and I felt ridiculously diminished dangling before her, one hand clapped to my hat lest it blow away and the other clutching a little iron hatchet.

Imperiously, I rapped with the blunt end of the hatchet on the nearer of the figurehead's matronly breasts.

With a groan of pain her lips moved. "Why did you bring me to life?" she asked. "When will you let me die?" I swung slightly in the stellar breezes and quickly wrapped my hatchet-arm around one of the basket's guy wires. Her eyes remained dull and wooden.

"Prophesy for me."

"Death," she said. "Damnation. Eternity. Futility. All this you knew long ago and without my intervention. If you will not let me die, then at least let me sleep."

Outraged, I slammed her cheek. The hatchet bounced off, leaving behind a gash in the wood. "Awaken! The fleets are gathering. This is not the universe as it once was. Stretch your thoughts, look out across the plains of destiny. Give me tidings dire enough to glut my hunger for them. Tell me of horrors too fearsome to hear."

Now, as if a disguising mist had blown away from her, a knowing light kindled in Sophonisba's eyes and her wooden substance was transported briefly to flesh. Blood trickled down from the hatchet-scratch but she paid it no mind. A wondering expression came over her. Where her gaze went, mine could not follow.

"Speak!"

She said nothing at first, and then:

"I see angels dying. I see your ship destroyed and its crew as well. All that is good will be defiled; all that is evil will come to naught; I see destruction without purpose and desolation without end."

I could not help but gloat. This was better than I had dared hope for. "More!" I demanded. "Tell me more—and worse. Make me despair."

Sophonisba nodded, all-but-invisibly, and her lips moved.

"Why did you agree to this?" she said. It was Starbuck's voice, sullen and suspicious. "If Captain Chang were to discover us—and in his own berth!"

A trill of laughter such as could have come from but one throat. "What does it matter to you, little man? You'd spit in the Captain's soup if you had the chance. Are you afraid to fuck his whore?"

I screamed.

"You lie, you lie, you lie!" Sophonisba's face was lifeless again, and I was slamming it repeatedly with the hatchet. In my fury I smashed off her nose entirely and splintered both eyes blind, rendering her permanently useless to the ship. Then I was roaring to Coffin to crank up the basket, crank up the basket, the damnable basket, damn you sir, up!

Sophonisba did not lie.

Starbuck lay, hairy-bellied and naked, upon the formerly crisp linen of my own sheets while Anastasia crouched over him, sucking his soul out through the conduit of his filthy little spigot.

My thoughts were like rabbits fleeing from dogs, scattering across empty fields in futile quest of a safe cranny. A single lamp glowed, flickering with every movement of the ship, which was considerable, for our inverse tau was enormous now as we continually closed upon the limiting speed of light. Even as I stood, hatchet raised, before Starbuck and Anastasia, overwhelmed with blood lust and horribly, unspeakably, *enjoying* it, stars were being born before the bow and dying in our wake.

With a shriek Anastasia leaped from the bed, yanking the sheet after her. It hid one breast, one thigh, a parody of modesty. Leaving her lover uncovered and vulnerable to my eye. And helpless before my hatchet.

I chopped off his hands.

I hacked out his liver and his heart. I sliced through the tendons on the backs of his calves so that he must henceforward not walk as a man but crawl as does a serpent. His cock and balls I flung out the porthole into the great vacuum mouth of the universe.

Finally I gouged out both of Starbuck's eyes and cast them after his privates. Let him stare forever into infinitude and glory. Let him suffer.

Leaving his mewling remains behind, I seized Anastasia by the wrist. I could smell Starbuck's musky sweat all over her, like rot in salt-pork.

I hauled her, naked and squealing, to the forward hold. The only light came from a single green-glass bull's eye lantern. Demon sailors started to their feet at my entry, rolling down from hammocks, rising from dice games and rat-baitings. "You dog-fucking bastard!" Anastasia raged. "I'll make you crawl for this. Oh, sweet suffering, the things I'll make you do!"

I flung her down before the crew.

Some things are too vile to describe. I stood watching until there was not the least remnant of humanity left in the thing that had for a brief span been Anastasia.

Then I left.

Time passed. The watches accumulated like pearls deposited by divers.

One night I was wrenched awake from the cold dreamlessness of sleep by a great pain in my temples. I pressed my hands against them, as if the pressure could keep my head from bursting open. In the shaving mirror upon the wall I saw that my forehead was purple and bruised and my face swollen, as if from a hundred agonizing blows. I could hear my teeth cracking and feel my jaw begin to break as the side of my face tore open. Something inside my skull was struggling to get out, striving to be born.

In a frenzy, I threw open my medical kit and seized a vial of heroin. I cooked the solution and prepared a syringe with a long, curved needle designed for this express purpose. Then, peeling back an eyelid, I slid the needle between eye and socket and shot its load directly into my brain.

It took three slugs to lay the pain to rest.

I was sitting on my berth considering what to do next when the air was split by the shrilling and brazen clangor of every whistle and bell

in the fleet being sounded at once. The thunder of cannons and demon drums swelled and merged into a roar the like of which had not been heard since that Word was spoken which began existence by shattering the primal monobloc. I leaped up, heart pounding, exultant.

The battle had at last begun.

We were in the vanguard of the fleet, right on the front line, but even so there was time to prepare. I had the ship's carpenter fasten an iron band about my forehead so that whatever lay within could not escape, and then turned my attention to the conversion of my ship. The internal bulkheads were taken down and the gunnery crew ran out the cannons. Weapons were served out to our marines and the fire-buckets filled with sand.

With a mighty creaking and groaning, the ship began to absorb the masts and extrude wings. Chitinous plates accreted over the hull and antennae sprouted above the mandibles at the prow. All around us ships were growing simple and compound eyes, proboscises, gaiters, stings and ovipositors, legs and tibia and spiracles, each according to its nature and genus. Steam issued from the cannon barrels and filthy holds still damp from piss and sweat. One by one the chittering voices of our unholy vessels rose up, merging into a single howl of despairing wrath.

My ship was the first to land on the icy desert plain.

Our multitudes rained down, frigates and cruisers and schooners and galleys and bomb vessels: ships of the line, swift chargers and cumbersome gunboats, all become locusts, hornets, wasps, mantises … Folding their wings and striding forward to ravage the fields of eternity. Marines crawled like ants down their ropes by the millions to defile the golden sands with shit and sacrilege. Briefly, we were unopposed.

Then the lookout screamed in rage and fear as a storm of angels kited up from the distant mountains. These were the lowliest of the Adversarial forces: its cherubim, those spirits so beautiful they were physically nauseating to look upon: gleaming towers of muscle and steel, wheels of whirling blades, hallowed and perfect; wings that billowed like sails, of such delicate construction that a soap bubble would be considered gross by comparison. Serene and pitiless eyes.

"Mister Coffin!" I cried. "Ready a salvo. On my word."

The closest of our enemies raised their lances. Needles of ruby light pierced carapace and armor plating. The boatswain's mate fell screaming to the deck, black bile gushing from his chest and back. Midshipman Coffin raised his hands to his mouth to form a megaphone. I glared them down. "Steady!" I barked. "Not yet."

The sacred *pneuma* rose up from our assailants in an invisible, lilac-scented cloud, driving the lesser demons mad and causing others to retch blood. "Not yet," I repeated. We could not fight them with bullets and shot, for we were *materia,* the real, the tangible, and that would be relinquishing one's essence, one's flesh and inner self to our opponents. But hermetic science (and swords and fists) would suffice to rid us of their oppression forever.

"Fire!"

The cannons blasted billows of black smoke into the attacking ranks. I had had them loaded with ancient injustices—the tears of the innocent, the screams of children, the prayers of the betrayed—and they wrought massive destruction upon the cherubim, who fell, broken, down the welling light to a land that blackened under them, each blasted angel staining and despoiling great swaths of the infinite plains.

So went the battle, bloody and disastrous for both sides. We were so perfectly matched that our struggle could only end in mutual and universal annihilation. But the advantage was ours, for it was the black flag of Annihilation under which we sailed, and the final end to suffering and punishment we sought. Our ships, driven by the strength of resentments older than the universe itself, cut through the Enemy in phalanxes, crushing with thoraxes wet with blood, spearing with claw and comb. An immense wasp exploded by our starboard bow and its crew were picked off before they hit the sands, eviscerated, mutilated, and eaten by the vengeful Defenders. A broadside caught an archangel square in the eye and he went down in explosions and gouts of blue flame.

I was the rattle and the saber. The fleets radiated out from my perfect fury like iron filings caught in a magnetic field. I was the very center, the focus, the eye of the hurricane. The children of wrath flocked to me like moths, and like moths they died in untellable numbers and unspeakable agony.

We fought for aeons.

Until finally, having exhausted all the ship's powder and its crew as well, Midshipman Coffin and I stood shoulder-to-shoulder on the blood-slick deck, faced with one final invading angel—a seraph. It was possible that he was the last of his kind.

The angel's strength was prodigious. With one blow of his fist he crushed Coffin and swept his body over the rail. With a second, he smashed my cutlass to flinders.

Dropping the hilt, I threw myself at the seraph; we locked arms about each other. My ribs splintered and cracked. Machine oil dribbled from his jaw and puffs of steam leaked from his joints. He forced that beautiful and pitiless face so close to mine I could see nothing else and murmured, "Look into my eyes."

Startled, I did. In all that inhuman visage of titanium and steel, only the eyes were organic. They were set into gimbals, held in place by pronged needles, and manipulated by gears and servomechanisms. Even so, I recognized them.

They were Starbuck's.

Those eldritch eyes blazed with amusement at my shocked recognition. Fleetingly I felt that what I fought was no more than an automaton, a marionette, the cat's-paw for forces beyond my comprehension. That all this, my glory and all-destroying triumph, were no more than a cruel and pointless shadow-play. Then I overbalanced and fell, pulling the seraph with me to the deck. For an instant my arm was free.

I seized the broken hilt of my cutlass and ran its twelve inches of jagged blade into the angel's abdomen. Hot ichor steamed over my clenched fist. For a long moment we lay thus, locked in homicidal embrace, and it was good, oh very good indeed, this moment was, far better than ever sex had been.

But even as I savored my victory, the Starbuck-eyed seraph rose up beneath me one last time. His blow was like lightning! I ducked its full force, but still his fist glancingly struck my forehead—and the iron band shattered!

Underneath me, laughing, the angel crumbled to nothing.

My pain was beyond expressing.

I rose to my knees, clutching my head in agony. I screamed as flesh extruded from flesh, essence from essence, physical being from the

stuff of my own body. Weeping bloody tears, I could barely look at the separate thing that arose from me, even as it tore the umbilicus of flesh connecting us. Liquids gushed away, weakening me, strengthening *her*.

Anastasia.

She rose up before me, shaping herself even as I watched. Wet and slick as a newborn infant, but proud, fearless—a warrior queen. She was infinitely stronger than I; she had clarified. Her body, nude, was less flesh than light; radiance itself, a steady candle. I groped for a weapon, any weapon, even as the ship, creaking and groaning, shifted underfoot.

Anastasia kicked me in the side. Ribs splintered.

I screamed.

She seized me by the pigtail and hauled me, struggling, to my feet. "Where is my body?"

"I—"

She struck me in the face. Blood and spittle flew. "Don't talk—go!"

Half-blind with pain, I led Anastasia down into my dreadful vessel's hollow innards. The hold was lit only by the feeble phosphorescence of its dying flesh. In the trembling dark, a-reek with gore and maggots, I sought out the mutilated remains of what had once been Anastasia and before her the cabin-boy.

It had been kept in an airless closet with a single bucket used to bring it slops and remove its leavings. When I unlocked the door, I was hit with the stench of gangrene. It had lost both legs and arms; the stumps were tied up with leather thongs. Its dugs were empty sacks, its face a noseless horror black with necrosis. That blind and fish-mouthed face gaping up at me, idiotic in its misery, was all but unrecognizable.

Anastasia drew in her breath with a short, sharp hiss. But she only said, "Carry her."

I picked the body up and discovered that it was almost liquescent. It sloshed like an overripe pear. Anastasia walked us to the sailmaker's cupboard and from it took needles, canvas, and leather. Swiftly, she fashioned a kind of saddle for her onetime body and a harness for me.

"Strip," she commanded.

I obeyed.

Her body stirred slightly. A sort of coughing noise hacked and rattled in its chest and for a horrified instant I thought it was laughing at me. But then in a tiny, mewling voice, it said, "I want … I want …"

"Hush." Anastasia's voice and face were like stone. "I know what you want." She called upon her powers and was abruptly clothed again, in the good wool of my second-best dress uniform. She hung a gilt-framed mirror in the air and fluffed the jabot so that the lace stood up crisp and white. Her hair she briskly brushed and pulled back into a pony-tail. She dashed on a touch of scent and made certain that the bow was perfectly straight.

Smiling her wrath, she turned upon me.

When at last she was done amusing herself, I was strapped and saddled like a mule. Her body was placed on my back.

Anastasia slapped me on the rump. "Move!"

We made our way up on deck. The corpses of my crew were strewn about. I looked upon them and felt nothing. Beyond, the immense insect-ships were breaking up and burning on the sands. Brown as lacquered wood, they kicked and struggled like dying cockroaches, their substance shifting in the golden light, disintegrating, degrading, rotting. The stench was terrible, the stink of elimination pits and extermination camps. So far as I could see, only we two had survived the holocaust.

We passed through the silent battle-grounds.

Gagged, harnessed, and bent over by the weight of Anastasia's mutilated body, I made my painful way across the sterile plains of Heaven.

How long did we travel? Hours? Days? Centuries? We did not sleep and there were no events to divide the eternal emptiness of the desert sands. I began the trek rabid with humiliation and inwardly raving for revenge. But the unvarying drudgery of passage leached away my passions a breath at a time, until all my past took on the unreality of a story told one time too many and I began to forget even my own name.

Finally, my senses numbed and emotions at zero, we came to a place where the unvarying sands stretched to infinity to all points of the compass. A place where all directions were one.

Anastasia's body was finally and undeniably dead. She unsaddled it and lowered it to the ground. Then she created a shovel and thrust it in my hands.

"Dig!" she commanded.

I delved the hole true and to the square: eight feet long, four feet wide, and six feet deep, with straight edges and crisp corners. Even Anastasia could find no fault with my work.

Her corpse lay alongside the grave. When I was done, she edged a foot underneath and unceremoniously rolled it in. It fell face upward.

Dead blue eyes stared up at me.

In that dizzying, vertiginous instant I remembered everything. All this had happened before, not once but innumerable times. Always to the same weary conclusion.

Exhausted and drained of emotion as I was, I would have made my peace with Anastasia if I could. But after all I had done to her, what overtures of mine would she accept? What words were sweet enough, groveling enough, *true* enough? None that human tongue had yet spoken.

Still—the alternative was unthinkable. I had to try.

But as I turned to speak, I saw Anastasia fade away, like smoke, like wind, like darkness.

And when I looked back, there were ships coming across the sands. I saw and, seeing, understood and, understanding, despaired.

The ships skimmed lightly over the golden sands, blowing slight tails in the dunes. A fresh and untouched flotilla, amnesiac, flagged by a schooner whose rails and shrouds were thronged with grotesques who were all aspects of a single woman. One among them, I knew, would love me despite herself—and pay dearly for doing so. The captain stood on the raised quarter-deck, looking-glass tucked under her arm, harshly beautiful, eyes stern beyond all reason. It was Anastasia's turn again.

This time the ships were hers.

This time we would sail to Hell.

In the Tradition …

A Cruise Through the Hard Fantasy Archipelago in Search of the Lonely and the Rum, Fairies in the Garden, the Semiotics of Alchemy, Spawn of the Industrial Womb, a John Deere Tractor, Dueling Witches, Broken Trilogies, Creatures from the Jungian Depths, Elegant Sex, Big Shoes and Bigger Bridges, a Stylish Death, the Reinvention of Language, and the Mad Apotheosis of Rhetoric

And so we set sail.

The green hills and haunted mountains of Middle Earth sink into the sea behind us. They are beauteous and filled with wonder, but already our attention is elsewhere. Our eyes strain ahead, searching for the mysterious islands that have called us away from our hearths and hobbit-holes, away from the comfortable and familiar. A fresh breeze parts the mists like curtains. The keel bites into iron-cold waters. Our ship leaps forward.

We are bound for the Fantasy Archipelago.

There was a time not many decades past when fantasy was not the prosperous marketing category it is today or even a marketing category at all. Indeed, fantasy of any description was as rare as griffins. Fantasy

writers routinely disguised their work as historicals or Arthuriana or (with the addition of a quickly forgotten spaceport or two) science fiction, or else they didn't get published at all.

J.R.R. Tolkien changed all that. The American paperbacks of his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy hit the publishing industry with the force of revelation. They either created or demonstrated the existence of (accounts vary) an enormous audience for fantasy. They made a lot of money. Publishers, many of them perilously close to being entirely without a clue, scrambled to find something, anything, to fill this previously unsuspected appetite.

In the aftermath, there was a blurb often seen bannered above the title of that occasional fantasy hastily resurrected and thrown back into print by a bewildered editor who could think of no way else to describe it: IN THE TRADITION it read OF ROBERT E. HOWARD AND J.R.R. TOLKIEN!

At the time I thought this the single worst description of a book ever attempted. Howard's and Tolkien's universes are, to understate the obvious, mutually exclusive. The image of that mighty-thewed barbarian, Conan, sometime yclept the Warrior, the Avenger, the Buccaneer, and the Conqueror, striding through the Shire to crush the settees and jeweled umbrella stands of the Sackville-Bagginses under his sandaled feet seemed to me irresistibly comic, the stuff of a Monty Python routine.

But age softens the hasty judgments of youth. A quarter-century later, I've come around to the side of that anonymous editorial drudge and decided he was right after all, that all my favorite works of fantasy are indeed In The Tradition of Robert E. Howard and J.R.R. Tolkien. Which is to say that they are each no more like the other than Gandalf the Grey is akin to Red Sonja. They are chimeras, *sui generis,* unique.

I'm going to write about what Tove Jansson called "the lonely and the rum," the unschoolable and ungroupable, those strange and shaggy literary creatures that have no ilk or kin and that mathematically can be contained in no set smaller than the set of all sets contained in no other sets. For ease of argument, I'm going to call this congeries of works *hard fantasy,* because I honestly believe that it holds a central place in its genre analogous to the place hard science fiction holds in SF.

Our voyage will be treacherous, for the waters are uncharted and by the very nature of our quest many an important work will be ig-

nored entirely. It is possible, too, that we shall occasionally land on what only appears to be an island. These are Faerie isles, after all, and some that seem solid now may turn to whales or mist in the morning. But the danger is justified not only by the beauty and wonder of our destinations, but because these are the works that drive fantasy, the source and justification for the entire genre, the engine that burns at the heart of its star.

Which is not to imply that there is anything wrong with the mighty continents of High Fantasy or of Mannerism or of Celtic Twilight or of Urban Fantasy or even of Mainstream. Shakespeare is a fine fellow in his place. But his place is not here.

White water hisses in our wake. From the crow's nest our elven lookout cries in a voice high and clear as that of a seabird. Everyone not engaged with the ropes or rudder rushes to the starboard rail to follow his pointing finger. Land!

Rising from the water before us are a triplet of isles: E.R. Eddison's Zimiamvian trilogy, *Mistress of Mistresses, A Fish Dinner in Memison,* and *The Mezentian Gate. The Worm Ouroboros,* often represented as being the first book in the sequence, is seriously flawed, only peripherally related, and is best read last, as a mantissa. The trilogy itself, however, is strong drink for connoisseurs of highly wrought prose. Eddison was a British career civil servant and these books contain the world he would rather have been born into, an alchemical marriage of the Renaissance and Middle Ages as they should have been, compounded of great passions, Elizabethan rhetoric, and genuine erotic feeling. Elizabeth Willey has characterized these books as "Tolkien with sex," but they might equally well be described as "Howard with politesse." They are In The Tradition.

Nor are they alone. More islands lift their heads from the sea, one after the other, misty with distance but rich with strange pleasures: Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* trilogy; Lord Dunsany's more-than-lapidarian tales of the Gods of Pegana and the lands At the Edge of the World and Beyond the Fields We Know; Clark Ashton Smith's misanthropic explorations of Zothique, Hyperborea, and Poseidonis; James Branch Cabell's *Jurgen* and select other books; and Hope Mirrlees's singular and incomparable *Lud-in-the-Mist,* which Neil Gaiman has noted deals with the central issue of the genre, "the reconciliation of the fantastic and the mundane."

This is a motley and argumentative crew to put into one boat. Tolkien disdained Dunsany, Cabell despised the critics, and Smith loathed the human race at large. Hard fantasy creates its own ancestors and antecedents, and it's doubtful that it would alter one word of any of the above works had the others never existed at all. But they belong with each other for the simple reason that they belong nowhere else.

Again the lookout shouts! We have come upon our first contemporary example of hard fantasy.

It is John Crowley's *Little, Big.*

Like most of the works I am anxious to discuss here, *Little, Big* is difficult to summarize. For an instant, the task before us seems daunting: We stand like children at the edge of the dark Wood and we know there are wolves within, witches mad for our flesh, and stranger things besides that are resistant to being put into words. Somewhere in the night an ogre chuckles.

Like children, we cannot resist going just a little deeper in.

Little, Big is a sort of family chronicle, a swirl of relationships radiating backward and forward in time, but always returning to Smoky Barnable and his son Auberon. Smoky, a quiet cipher of a man, falls in love with Daily Alice of the extensive Drinkwater clan, who cures him of anonymity and gives him a place in what her family calls the Tale. He comes to Edgewood, the Drinkwater folly, to marry her, and in an old volume titled *Upstate Houses and Their Histories,* makes a disquieting discovery:

> And here was a photograph of two people sitting at a stone table, having tea. There was a man who looked like the poet Yeats, in a pale summer suit and spotted tie, his hair full and white, his eyes obscured by the sunlight glinting from his spectacles; and a younger woman in a wide white hat, her dark features shaded by the hat and blurred perhaps by a sudden movement. Behind them was part of this house Smoky sat in, and beside them, reaching up a tiny hand to the woman, who perhaps saw it and moved to take it and then again perhaps not (it was hard to tell), was a figure, personage, a little creature about a foot high in a conical hat and pointed shoes. His broad inhuman features seemed

> blurred too by sudden movement, and he appeared to bear a pair of gauzy insect wings. The caption read "John Drinkwater and Mrs. Drinkwater (Violet Bramble;) elf. Edgewood, 1912."

Disquieting, but not exactly proof of anything. The reader is left in a position similar to Smoky's, knowing that there is some family connection to the Little People (early on, Daily Alice goes to a pool to ask advice of Grandfather Trout, who unequivocally speaks to her), but never—until the end—clear as to the nature of that connection.

Though he brushes against it from time to time, Smoky is forever an outsider to the strangeness. He can never truly be a member of the family, for he simply cannot bring himself to believe in fairies. This alienation he inadvertently passes on to his son.

Little, Big opens with Smoky's pilgrimage into the Tale. Auberon makes his first appearance as an adult, when he goes to the City in a vain attempt to escape it. But for all the coziness of their early manifestations, there are large and dangerous forces astir. A vitality is being leached from the decaying world. The City settles into an endless recession. Eternal winter looms. Almost incidentally, Auberon undergoes a corresponding deterioration. Whatever is going on, Auberon is firmly ensnared in its workings.

It is an extreme act of daring that Crowley has performed here. He has crafted a work of contemporary adult literature from the Matter of fairy tales and nursery rhymes. (His debt is acknowledged with nods to Milne, Lofting, Meredith, Carroll, MacDonald, Lewis and other authors from that great continent of children's fantasy that lies east of the sun, west of the moon, and beyond this essay's purview entirely.[1]) That he pulls it off at all is nothing short of miraculous. But the single greatest accomplishment of *Little, Big* is how it manages to be consistently fey and homely both, without ever once falling over that razor-edged precipice into the abyss of the twee.

1. As does the somewhat smaller continent of young adult fiction, any discussion of which must surely include Michael de Larrabetti's "Borrible" books, Alan Garner's *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen,* and the collected works of Diana Wynne Jones, as well as border-adult fantasies such as Patricia McKillip's *The Forgotten Beasts of Eld,* to say nothing of … Oh God, no. No, no, no, no, no. This is too much. This is madness. Somebody else will have to write that neverending essay. Not me.

Crowley's book is backward-turning, nostalgic, and tinted in the hues of a nineteenth-century chromo. But I would not have you believe that hard fantasy never boogies to the intellectual beat of the day.

With the ascendance of the information economy over manufacturing and the ensuing rise of semiotics (for each new ruling elite requires theoretical validation), has come a corresponding need to rewrite intellectual history. Medieval Scholasticism, neglected for centuries, has made a resurgence; Giordano Bruno—conveniently martyred by the Church for sins of intellectual hubris—has been grandfathered in as an ancestral figure; and the protoscience of alchemy is looked at afresh not as the progenitor of chemistry or as a spiritual endeavor, but as an occult mental discipline whose chief purpose is the ordering and describing of the universe.

Thus, Mary Gentle's *Rats and Gargoyles.*

In the alchemical world of *Rats and Gargoyles,* triangles have four sides and squares have five. Humans are an underclass, forbidden to carry weapons or money, ruled by an aristocracy of Rats. Who in turn are subject to the whims of winged monstrosities in the service of twenty-four Decans, the creators and maintainers of the universe, incarnate in an immense cathedral. "We have strange masters" is a byword in the city known only as the Heart of the World.

Indeed. Nor does the strangeness stop there. This is a world in which rulers send their heirs to study at the University of Crime. Where a mysterious black Boat carries the dead back to life. Where the Katayan people have long, prehensile tails. Where flash cameras and mechanical computers coexist with swordplay. We're definitely not in Kansas anymore.

The organizing principle for all this is alchemy, and the narrative strategy is confusion. The alchemy, I suspect, is more a source of imagery than a rigidly enforced system. The confusion is deliberate, a result of the decision to show everything and explain nothing, so that the reader is inevitably a step or two behind the characters at all times. But not entirely in the dark—comprehension is arrived at in retrospect, after the fact. The reader is put in the position of that bird which, flying backward, knows not where it's going but only where it's been.

The *events* of the novel concern a snarl of conspiracies, plots, and blind attempts to stave off disaster. There are at least six factions in play, each with its own agenda. Trying to ride the gathering storm are

the White Crow (a Soldier-Adept of the Invisible College), the master architect and comic slob Casaubon, a distinctly Delanyesque young woman whose eidetic gift makes her a King's Memory, and a student prince, among others. There are dozens of distinct and individually motivated characters, all working at cross purposes.

All the old, familiar pleasures of the genre are here in the double-handfuls: High-rhetoricked, sword-carrying lords, a warrior in crimson armor, romantic sexual liaisons, and dark gods in Leiberesque profusion. But the lords are Rats, the warrior and her seducer both women, the gods ultimately not terribly sinister. There is a constant confounding of expectations in big and little ways throughout. As when disgruntled laborers plan their resistance:

> This ziggurat will rise between two pyramidical obelisks that are equal in thickness to the building itself. A mile away an identical pair of obelisks rises, completed two generations ago. Great hieroglyphs are burned into their stone sides. This burning of stone happened during an eclipse of the sun that lasted four days.
>
> "No. We don't wait." This speaker is the most assured. "You're right: they need us to build, because they can't. So—"
>
> "If we stop work, they'll kill enough of us that the rest will go back to work. We've tried that before."
>
> To north and east and aust of the ziggurat, more of the Fane's perpendicular frontages cut the sky. Here, the sky itself is the color of ashes.
>
> "They can force us to work," the first speaker says, "but who can force a man to eat or to sleep?"

Which is not how job actions work in *our* world.

In the end alchemy makes a wonderfully convenient system for what Gentle is doing here: questioning the nature of genre fantasy and challenging the assumptions underlying its appeal while taking full advantage of their power.

William Gibson once remarked that William S. Burroughs, of *Naked Lunch* and *Nova Express* fame, was the first writer to treat science fiction like a rusty egg-beater, something he could pick up and use as a found object in his own art. Gentle here is engaged in a quieter version of the same game, retooled for fantasy. The trademark characteristics

of postmodern fiction, it has been much remarked, are pastiche and appropriation. And *Rats and Gargoyles* is—never doubt it—a distinctly postmodern work. Whether anybody deigns to follow or not, it points out a totally new direction for the genre to take.

Running close by the coast of Science Fiction under cover of darkness, we douse the running lights and break out rifles for the crew. We are in disputed waters here, and despite the fact that it won a World Fantasy Award, not everyone would agree that Geoff Ryman's *The Unconquered Country* lies within our territory.

The single most vivid and horrific moment in Ryman's novella (for it is a brief work, though packaged as a stand-alone volume) comes right at the beginning. It's a description of what Third Child, the protagonist, must do to survive. Here's the gist of it:

> Third rented her womb for industrial use. She was cheaper than the glass tanks. She grew parts of living machinery inside her—differentials for trucks, small household appliances … . When Third was lucky, she got a contract for weapons. The pay was good because it was dangerous. The weapons would come gushing suddenly out of her with much loss of blood, usually in the middle of the night: an avalanche of glossy, freckled, dark brown guppies with black, soft eyes and bright rodent smiles full of teeth. No matter how ill or exhausted Third felt, she would shovel them, immediately, into buckets and tie down the lids. If she didn't do that, immediately, if she fell asleep, the guppies would eat her.

Nothing in what follows rises to such appalling heights (thank goodness), but the tone has been set. *The Unconquered Country* is a fantasy treatment of the recent genocidal history of Cambodia and of what Ryman has termed "the blasting of culture, the homogenization of the world," merged into one grim fable. These are not easy things to read about, and I wonder whether I would have finished the book had it been nonfiction or even "straight" fiction? Some nightmare truths come perilously close to being not only unbearable but untellable.

A land known to Third only as the Neighbors has done the unthinkable and, aided by the Big Country, conquered her homeland, the Unconquerable Country. The war as perceived by a back-country peasant is sketched out in quick strokes: The houses of a village attacked by flying Sharks panic and stampede. A dead suitor returns in the form of a crow to protect and comfort Third. Delicate life-saving devices, evicted from a hospital, plead with soldiers not to be destroyed.

The ultimate enemy of the People, however, is not the Neighbors or even their (American) sponsors, but something less tangible and harder to fight: the cultural Holocaust of the twentieth century. When the rebels finally win back their country, they are no longer People. The Unconquered Country is an imaginary land with invented customs and a make-believe culture. No reader, however, will mistake its climactic scenes for anything but the forced evacuation of Phnom Penh by the Khmer Rouge. The rebels in victory have become yet another set of aliens.

This work is no mere allegory, however, or facile conceptualization. It is a genuinely moving human-scale story. Ryman's central achievement is that the events are all seen through the eyes of a traditional peasant woman, and that this is done without condescension or false sentiment. He writes of Third as you or I would of a member of our own family, with respect and the occasional touch of exasperation.

I implied earlier that *The Unconquered Country* might easily be read as science fiction. Everything in it could be justified by speculative science—bioengineering, nanotechnology, and the rest of the conceptual tool kit. I've seen less plausible in works proudly labeled "hard SF." But the mere presence of machinery (though still viewed with suspicion in the provinces) does not invalidate a work as fantasy. And the truth here is that this is not a work concerned with the uses to which human beings put technology. Rather it's an examination of what happens to a culture that has been passed through Hell.

In the end, after the horror, *The Unconquered Country* is not about war, atrocity, genocide, or the loss of cultures. It is what comes after: What remains untouched, what is of value, and what endures.

Terry Bisson's *Talking Man* must be the only fantasy in existence which contains a careful description of the workings of a hand-clutch John

Deere "A" tractor. It's a good description, too. Bisson has worked as an auto mechanic. He knows machines.

Here's how it starts:

> There are two ways to tell a wizard. One is by the blue light that plays around his tires when he is heading north on wet pavement under the northern lights, his headlights pointed toward the top of the world that so many talk about but so few have actually seen.
>
> The other is by his singing.
>
> Talking Man was a wizard who had a small junkyard on the side of a hill on the Kentucky Tennessee line. He sold parts and cars, swapped guns and cars, fixed farm machinery and cars, dug ginseng and mayapple in season, and had a 1,100-pound allotment of burley tobacco which he let his daughter raise. He kept no chickens, no hogs and no dogs.

The ironically-named (he never speaks) Talking Man is a wizard from the end of time. He continually dreams the world into being. He is the sole guardian of existence from the all-negating blight of "the unbeen." He lives in a trailer with his sixteen-year-old daughter Crystal.

Mostly, though, he's a hell of a mechanic. "He could take the knock out of a poured-bearing Chevrolet with a set of 3/8-inch sockets and a wood file in an afternoon; he could free a stuck valve by pouring pond water through a carburetor, set points with cigarette papers, and sharpen a chainsaw without a file by passing the bar through a green-persimmon fire and singing a certain unhearable, to most people, song." (I had a mechanic like that once, and I live to find his equal.)

The unbeen was dreamed up by Talking Man's sister and creation and lover (it's nothing if not lonely at the end of time) Dgene. One day she arrives to unsettle his life and undo all of creation. He steals a car and flees.

The car is stolen from one William Tilden Henricks Williams, a dreamer and dropout who is first seen squandering the limited inheritance that was optimistically supposed to get him through law school on an arcade game called Missile Command. Williams and Crystal hit the road, looking for her father, looking for Williams's cousin's car (it's borrowed), looking for answers. Mostly they hit the road because they're at that age when it seems the reasonable thing to do.

Thus begins a car chase to the North Pole and Edminidine, the city at the top of the world. Along the way Bisson explains how to grow tobacco, the true character of Owensboro, and how to heal a punctured oil pan with blood sacrifice.

The chase is beside the point, really. The very best parts of *Talking Man* are all about cars, country life, and those parts of the continent where most writers never go. Particularly Bisson knows Kentucky and points west, its landscapes, saints and yahoos, and can write about them without hysteria or sentimentality. Even in those transformed passages where Illinois has mountains and the Mississippi lies at the bottom of a canyon six miles wide and a thousand feet deep, the text shines with his familiarity with and love for non-urban, non-Coastal America.

In one important way, this novel is precursor to the author's acclaimed "Bears Discover Fire." Here for the first time, Bisson found his voice, a gentle Kentucky diction that is at times as smooth and potent as the finest sipping bourbon.

The mythological underpinning—with its brother-and-sister wizards, a city at one end of time and a tower at the other, and so on—is unquestionably high fantasy. Instead of working with the received set of crofts, castles, and cryptic ruins, however, Bisson has created a world out of Exxon stations, Chryslers, and 7-Elevens. As a result, *Talking Man* completely transcends its sources.

It's an amazing demonstration of what power there is to be found by rethinking the basics.

Terry Bisson lives in New York City, and his novel is an exemplar of the expatriate's love for lands left behind. Rebecca Ore is a native and current inhabitant of Critz (it rhymes with "heights"), Virginia, who once left for Bohemia and the Big Apple but later returned home to stay. Her love of the South in general and the Blue Ridge foothills region in particular, is equally genuine but distinctly qualified. As is amply demonstrated by *Slow Funeral,* her fourth novel and first fantasy.

Maude Fuller is a witch, hiding from her inherited powers in Berkeley, California, faking psychosis to obtain welfare, and living in a commune of witch wannabes for camouflage. Her grandmother, Partridge, is dying, however, and just as she gets involved with an interesting man—an engineer—Maude is called back to Bracken County to watch over

Partridge's death. Not coincidentally, she must also face up to the temptation to seize the magic that is her birthright.

The magic is embedded in the county's bedrock micro-plate, the Bracken County allocthon, an anomalous visitor to North America from 600 million years ago, rich in the iron-alumina-silicate crystals that Virginians call "fairystones." It manifests itself as capricious discorporate entities that only select individuals can use and be used by. And it is weakened by logic and rational thought:

> Mid October was the season of the last overflights with National Guardsmen and the sheriff's deputies looking for dug patches. Most older Bracken County people hated having the helicopters overhead because that much unadapted machinery in the air spread logic all over the place and killed magic. Even people who didn't rely on entities allied themselves to people who did, made secondary use of the magic. But the children looked around when the machines flew. Freed of a compulsion to stay in the county and fetch and carry for someone powerful, some local kids from the powerless classes joined the military under the protection of its vast machines, the helicopters, the jets from Norfolk that flew practice bombing runs against the high school, afterburner booms canceling a teacher's drone forever. And left, got educated, and never came back.

Most of us think it would be pretty darned Neat if magic really existed. Maude knows better. Magic is inherently cruel. A world in which some people can make deals with the universe and others can't inevitably leads to a social order in which the elite believe that owning people is an absolute right.

You'll be wondering by now how open magic-working (including compulsions, mutilations, and an entire research institute housed in the back of a pickup truck) is supposed to be kept secret. It isn't. One of the best-reasoned elements of *Slow Funeral* is that everybody in the county knows the score and nobody pretends otherwise. But it's understood that spilling the beans will do no good whatsoever. After all, what cosmopolitan in his right mind is going to listen to a bunch of hick Southerners?

Maude's engineer, Doug, follows her to Bracken County. But the logic she was counting on bolstering her has completely abandoned him.

Disgusted by his own labor because it is used to "empower inferior people," he longs for magic, thinking it just another technology he can learn and master. He doesn't realize that magic cannot be learned. That by surrendering his status as a member of the technological elite he's made himself one of the inferiors. That he's just become a victim.

Maude struggles to protect herself, save her feckless engineer, and help Partridge to an easy death by keeping her Aunt Betty from eating the old woman's soul. In the course of which she pieces a quilt, takes Doug to a "chicken fight" (locals don't say "cock" in public), flirts with a homicidal handgun, engages in family politics, and observes the social mores of her part of the world.

It is here that Ore shines, in her observations of the complex interrelationships between blacks and whites, between fundamentalists and nonbelievers, between those who own and those who are owned. She is particularly good with the ruthless politeness that in the South hides bitter truths, and the blind obligations that bind person to person. Especially within families. As any matriarch will tell you, just because a relative is plotting to kill you and eat your soul doesn't get you out of Sunday dinner at her house.

There are expectations to be upheld.

A silent shadow slips over our ship. The crew stare upward with wonder and some little fear. For topping the craggy cliffs of the nearest island is that grim and endlessly rising castle named Gormenghast. Here is one of the great eccentricities of English literature, a more-than-Gothic construct builded upon three books. *Titus Groan* and *Gormenghast* are both set in that pocket universe, vast and rambling, ruled by tradition and inertia, a treasure-box of repressed and stunted souls. Within are such vividly warped caricatures of humanity as Charles Dickens might have penned in a sour mood. Even their names—Slagg, Barquentine, Flay, Swelter, Sepulchrave—seem little more than flakes chipped from the great stones of Gormenghast.

Yet, paradoxically, when the gloriously villainous Steerpike threatens the social order, the reader is not on his side. And when the monstrously large Gertrude, Countess of Groan, trailed always by a white froth of cats, heavy and abstracted, the very soul of Gormenghast, awakens to the presence of an enemy in the castle, even the dullest spirit must experience a thrill of excitement.

Titus Alone, the third book, is by contrast a lamed thing, for the action takes place outside of Gormenghast, and for all the charming grotesquerie of its characters, it is the castle itself that is the real star of the series. Peake wrote this book while he was dying, and, alas, it shows.

But Peake was not alone in failing to conclude his sequence satisfactorily. E.R. Eddison did not live to complete the third book of his Memison series—the middle chapters of it exist only in detailed synopses. Avram Davidson failed to finish several multi-volume works. He wrote *The Island Under the Earth* and stopped. He wrote *Peregrine: Primus* and *Peregrine: Secundus,* two-thirds of the funniest fantasy series ever written, but never arrived at *Terces.* He left *The Phoenix and the Mirror,* with its darkly brilliant vision of Virgil not as the poet history knows but the Magus the Middle Ages thought him, at a cliffhanger, abandoned the project for years, and then went on to write a "non-prequel" to the work. Then he died, a brilliant writer, a tragic figure, and all too typical of what fate awaits even the best fantasists.

There sometimes seems a curse on the entire Archipelago, one that takes the form of broken or flawed trilogies. Tolkien was the grand exception in actually completing *The Lord of the Rings* and by testimony of the decades he later spent tinkering with and never finishing *The Silmarillion* and related fragments, it was a fluke.

So, despite the fact that it is only the first in a sequence of so far three books that has not yet achieved closure, I have no hesitation in commending to your attention as an important and even core work of hard fantasy, Robert Holdstock's *Mythago Wood.*

The protagonist of *Mythago Wood* is a young WWII vet named Steven Huxley. But the central character is Ryhope Wood, "Three square miles of original, post-Ice Age forestland .... Resistant to change." There is a strange power to the wood that makes it a sort of psychic vortex. Movement inward toward the heartwoods grows progressively more difficult and finally impossible. And by interaction with the minds of whoever is daring enough to enter Ryhope, the wood throws off what Steven Huxley's late father George dubbed "mythagos."

As Steven's brother Christian explains:

> "... it's in the unconscious that we carry what he calls the pre-mythago—that's *myth imago,* the image of an idealized form of a myth creature. The image takes on substance in a natural environment, solid flesh, blood, clothing, and—

> as you saw—weaponry. The form of the idealized myth, the hero figure, alters with cultural changes, assuming the identity and technology of the time. When one culture invades another—according to father's theory—the heroes are made manifest, and not just in one location! Historians and legend-seekers argue about where Arthur of the Britons, and Robin Hood *really* lived and fought, and don't realize that they lived in *many* sites. And another important fact to remember is that when the mind image of the mythago forms, it forms in the *whole* population ... and when it is no longer needed, it remains in our collective unconscious, and is transmitted through the generations."

The mythagos are a stunning invention, dark and powerful visitors from the Jungian depths. Nearly but not wholly human, they exude a breath of menace and potential violence. Typical of them is the briefly glimpsed Twigling—"a man in brown, leathery clothes, with a wide, gleaming belt around his waist, and a spiky, orange beard that reached to his chest: on his head he wore twigs, held to his crown by a leather band." These are not the special-effects scarecrow myth-figures of mediocre fantasy, but the raw thing, shaggy and dangerous.

Before the book begins, Christian has married and lost a mythago named Guiwenneth, a Roman-era warrior princess archetype and precursor of the later Guenevere. Shot through the eye by a Jack-in-the-green, she died and was buried by her grieving husband alongside the Huxley chicken-huts. But Christian, convinced he can regenerate her, retreats to the woods. Soon he is so deeply embedded in the matrix of power he cannot escape, translated himself more than halfway to the archetypal. His very nature is profoundly changed.

The ley lines of obsession run like fire through *Mythago Wood.* Huxley *pater*'s life had been spent cataloguing the mythagos, identifying the periods that gave rise to them, and through them trying to understand the minds of the peoples of ancient and prehistoric times. The search destroyed his marriage and alienated his sons. Yet he kept notes only sporadically, and never published. The scientific impulse gave way to more primal drives. In the end, he fixated on a single mythago—Guiwenneth. Only to lose her to his son. Who in turn loses her reincarnation to Steven. The relationship between brothers turns murderous.

Of all the books under discussion in this essay, *Mythago Wood* is hands-down the single most gripping. For surface plot alone, it is compulsive reading. But like the wood itself, there are depths here. As the brothers discover, the mythagos are at least partially shaped by unconscious expectations. Christian's Guiwenneth is gentle and unwarlike because his father—who knew her first—could not imagine a violent woman. When Steven first encounters her, she is changed, fiercer, because she has been shaped this time by Christian. The father died seeking the Urscumug, the primary archetypal image from which all other forms derive. But when the Urscumug finally appears, its boar's face has painted over it in white clay the features of George Huxley.

There is an intellectual excitement to this work that rivals the more visceral appeals of blood-lust and fratricide. Holdstock takes the fragmentary and contradictory elements of folklore and twists them into a new shape. His characters act out a convincing demonstration of the power and nature of myth, and how it shapes and drives the human animal, however sophisticated we believe we are, disbelieve it how we will. There's no denying that *Mythago Wood* is entertaining, but it is much more as well.

I can think of only two writers who can rival Holdstock in his bred-in-the-bone comprehension of the workings of myth. M. John Harrison in his Viriconium books and Keith Roberts in such works as *Pavane* and *The Chalk Giants* each in his own very different way displays a startlingly sure understanding of the stuff and nature of myth and its historic underpinnings. It can scarce be coincidence that all three of these writers are English. In the British Isles, children grow up with stone circles, Roman roads, and ring forts sometimes literally in their back yards. In my darker moments, I sometimes wonder if maybe Americans should give up on writing fantasy altogether.

If there is one commonality among the hard fantasists, it is that they are not a prolific lot. Tanith Lee, however, is prolific. Which makes it hard to single out one work for examination. A survey of her *œuvre* would necessitate the exclusion of other writers. Nor can she simply be skipped over. She is a Power, and has earned her place here.

I've chosen to focus on Lee's Arkham House collection *Dreams of Dark and Light* not only in the name of ruthless simplification but also because it is a rare thing for a hard fantasist to work much in short fic-

tion (novels being the preferred length of eccentricity, and eccentricity being the name of the game) and rarer still for one individual to excel at both lengths.

Here's a quick sampler of what happens in *Dreams of Dark and Light:* A selkie beds a seal-hunter in trade for the pelt of her murdered son. The dying servant of an aged vampire procures for her a new lover. A writer becomes obsessed with a masked woman who may or may not be a gorgon. A young woman rejects comfort, luxury, and the fulfillment of her childhood dreams, for a demon lover. These are specifically adult fictions.

There is more to these stories than the sexual impulse. But I mention its presence because its treatment is never titillating, smirking, or borderline pornographic, as is so much fiction that purports to be erotic. Rather, it is elegant, langorous, and feverish by turns, and always tinged with danger. Which is to say that it is remarkably like the writing itself.

In "Elle Est Trois (La Mort)" three artists—a poet, a painter, a composer—are visited by avatars of Lady Death. The suicidal allure of *la vie bohème,* with its confusion of death, sex, poverty and the muse, has rarely been so well conveyed as here. The artists are captured as their essences, each courting death in his own way. The composer France unwittingly acknowledges this when he tells his friend Etiens Saint-Beuve, "One day such sketches will be worth sheafs of francs, boxes full of American dollars. When you are safely dead, Etiens, in a pauper's grave."

After France himself has been taken, the poet Armand Valier muses on Death's avatars (the Butcher, the Thief, the Seducer) in Lee's sorcerous prose:

> ... And then the third means to destruction, the seductive death who visited poets in her irresistible caressing silence, with the petals of blue flowers or the blue wings of insects pasted on the lids of her eyes, and: See, your flesh also, taken to mine, can never decay.
>
> And this will be true, for the flesh of Armand, becoming paper written over by words, will endure as long as men can read. And so he left the window. He prepared, carefully, the opium that would melt away within him the iron barrier that no longer yielded to thought or solitude or wine.

> And when the drug began to live within its glass, for an instant he thought he saw a drowned girl floating there, her hair swirling in the smoke .... Far away, in another universe, the clock of Notre Dame aux Lumineres struck twice.

This is the apotheosis of romantic decadence—sex, drugs, and death mixed into a single potent cocktail. But, lest the reader suspect her of indulging in mere literary nostalgia, Lee notes in passing that "the poet would have presented this history quite differently," by introducing a unifying device, such as a cursed ring. This sly contrasting of the story's sinuous structure with the clanking apparati of its Gothic ancestors, does more than just establish that the fiction is an improvement on antique forms. It hints (no more) that the real horror, the real beauty, the real significance of the story, is that death is universal. She is a true democrat, an unselective lover who sooner or later comes for all, aware of her or not, the reader no less than the author.

Once upon a time the Romantics elevated the emotions above reason, sought the sublime in the supernatural and the medieval, and elevated the equation of sex and death to cult status. Following generations took their machinery and put it to lesser ends, much as the forms of magic were taken over by performers of sleight-of-hand. They could do no better, for they had lost the original vision.

Lee's work is a return to sources and a rejuvenation of that original vision. It is the higher passions that matter. Viktor, the bored aristocrat in "Dark as Ink" is too wise to pursue his obsessions, and for this sin suffers a meaningless life and early death. But the eponymous heroine of "La Reine Blanche" finds redemption despite her singular regicide and unwitting betrayal of her fated love because she has stayed true to her passions. An erotic spirituality shimmers like foxfire from the living surfaces of this book.

By some readings (though not mine) these works could be classified as horror. There has long been a midnight trade between the genres, ridge-runners and embargo-breakers smuggling influences both ways across the borders. It's illegal, we are all agreed, but is it wrong? No one would dare attempt to expel the late Fritz Leiber from the Empire of the Fantastic. Yet he readily admitted that nearly all his work was, at heart, horror. Even his Fafhrd and Gray Mouser stories, though disguised by ambiguously upbeat endings and the wit and charisma of their heroes, exist in an almost Lovecraftian horror-fiction universe. In the

end, the only question that matters is whether the work suits our purposes or not.

"As I supposed," says a raven in one of these tales, "your story is sad, sinister, and interesting." Exactly so. There are twenty-three stories in this volume, and I recommend them all.

The obsidian sea turns bottle-green and then turquoise. Sand grates under the keel. We are come upon *Bones of the Moon.* Beaching our ship, we lightly set foot on … land?

It is a strange fate that has befallen Jonathan Carroll. A man whose first novel, *The Land of Laughs,* was enthusiastically embraced by the genre readership, has with equal ease been acclaimed by the mainstream as one of its own. The wet smooch of genre is normally the kiss of death as far as literary respectability goes. Yet there he stands.

Well, the mainstream is a funny place. It claims for its own Amos Tutuola's "thronged and grisley" (as Dylan Thomas characterized it) *The Palm-Wine Drinkard,* along with the collected works of T.H. White and C.S. Lewis, Michael Ayrton's *The Maze-Maker,* and even such genre superstars as Ray Bradbury and Ursula K. Le Guin, while stoutly excluding R.A. Lafferty, John Myers Myers's *Silverlock,* and (as yet) Samuel R. Delany. It embraced, lionized, and then abandoned James Branch Cabell, whose antic satire *Jurgen* is still alive with fantastic invention long after the salacious qualities that prompted a famous obscenity trial have become invisible to the modern eye. It treasures Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* while deploring those fantastic elements without which it has neither existence nor purpose. There is no use looking to the mainstream for intellectual rigor.

To discover why the outside world would even consider poaching in the genre preserves, one need look no further than to Carroll's wholly enviable prose style:

> Because Greece was the first 'Europe' I had ever known, I loved it like you love your first child: you demand everything of it and what you receive swells your heart like a balloon.
>
> When we returned to Italy after those first two weeks, I had the secret fear that nothing could be as good as those first days overseas. Afternoon light couldn't possibly fall on

> broken walls the same way as it did in Greece. Where else on earth would someone think of using giant rubber bands to hold the tablecloth down at an outdoor restaurant? On beaches of black sand, men walked alongside ancient mules that carried melons for sale. The men cut the melons in half with one swat of a big knife and the red fruit tasted so sweet and cool in the hot afternoon sun.

Nor is it only in the depiction of sensuous detail that Carroll excels. The fantasy world of Rondua, experienced by his heroine, Cullen James, in a series of connected dreams, is as crisp and vivid as so many illustrations torn from so many classic picture-books. Even his throwaways are evocative, as when Cullen reflects on stories told within her dreams, that "Like jokes we hear and then forget until someone begins telling them again, I could have told my son what came next: how the mountains had learned to run, why only rabbits were allowed pencils, when the birds had decided to become all one color."

Dreaming, Cullen accompanies her young son, Pepsi—who in the "real" world was aborted—the wolf Felina, Martio the camel, and Mr. Tracy, a dog in a large felt hat, on a quest for the five Bones of the Moon. In her waking life, she suffers, loves, weds, suffers more, finds new friends, and faces a final horror at the point where reality and dreams collide.

The ending, as in all of Carroll's fiction, is abrupt and alarming, like an unsuspected trap-door opening underfoot. The first several times I encountered this device, it seemed an inexplicable loss of control for an otherwise accomplished writer. Eventually it became clear that for whatever unguessable reason this is a deliberate effect. It is simply part of the price you have to pay, if you want to read the book.

Yet I'll confess to having my doubt whether this island should be on our itinerary at all. The fantasy world of Rondua, brilliant as it is in glimpses and pieces, is a patchwork creation. Were the real-world sections excised and the rest expanded to fill the gaps, it could never be made into a self-consistent system. Nor, as the reader is reminded by a dozen clever devices, is it meant to.

When an author doesn't deep down, on some level, believe in the reality of his invented world, he's not engaged in fantasy but metaphor. *Bones of the Moon* is like unto the sea-monster Jasconius on which Brendan the Navigator and his mariner monks celebrated a Mass to the

glory of God every Easter Sunday for seven years. It is no true island at all but a fabulous beast, and one that owes its allegiance not to our own dear lords, but to the masters of cislunar literature.

The less daring of our crew look about uneasily, ready to bolt for the ship at the least sign that vast Jasconius is preparing to plunge down into those airless and Stygean realms and dominions where such as they cannot thrive. The ground trembles underfoot.

James Blaylock first got the field's attention with *The Digging Leviathan,* which profoundly puzzled science fiction readers by narrating a frenzied round of slapstick activity by a crew of suburban misfits, all centered on the eponymous digging machine, without ever quite getting around to having his characters switch the damned thing *on.* He's written several very good books since, but I've fixed on *Land of Dreams* because it indirectly explains exactly why this was beside the point.

Land of Dreams focuses on Skeezix, Helen, and Jack, three youngteen orphans in a coastal Northern California village. In stark contrast to most genre fiction, it is not immediately clear in which direction the book intends to go. For a time odd events simply accumulate: A midnight train thunders down rusty and incomplete tracks incapable of supporting it. Unwholesome fish are taken from the sea. A man the size of a human thumb is briefly glimpsed, holding a mouse-head mask in his arms. The carnival comes to town. An enormous shoe washes ashore and the three friends resolve to salvage it and take it to their friend, Dr. Jensen:

> Jack set a hooded lantern on a driftwood burl, so that the light was shining down onto the shoe, and then all three of them started bailing water out of it with milk buckets … They shoved one of the timbers—an immense broken oar, it seemed, from a monumental wrecked rowboat—in under the toe and then wedged the other timber under it, levering away at the first until the heel edged around and down the hill. They inched it along, burying their fulcrum timber in the soft beach sand and pulling it out and resetting it and burying it again, until water rushed from the toe to the heel. Then they bailed it clean, shoved it farther, bailed once more, and then pushed the shoe entirely over onto its side, ocean

> water cascading out past the tongue and the laces and the heel edge along with a shoal of silvery fish that flopped and wriggled on the wet sand.

Which is as good a description of how to bail out a giant shoe as I've ever encountered. The shoe joins the doctor's collection of big stuff, including "a round, convex sheet of cracked glass, like the crystal of an impossible watch; a brass belt buckle the size of a casement window; and a cuff link that might as easily have been a silver platter." Later, Dr. Jensen caulks the shoe, rigs a mast, fits a tiller across the heel, and takes it out sailing.

It should already be clear that half the novel's population—the good guys—are misfits, cranks, eccentrics, incompetents, or admixtures of all of the above. Arrayed against them are an equally motley crew of villains, drawn by Blaylock with great gusto. Miss Flees and her toady Peebles, the choleric MacWilt, the occasionally corviform Dr. Brown, and the rest, are hideous and malignant creatures all, and prey to their own craven, violent, and envious natures.

Luckily, they're even less effective than the heroes. As a kindly ghost explains to Helen, "They're certain *you* hate things too, that the world is made out of dirt. But that's what gives you the edge; they can't understand you." Guided partially by the villains' attempts to stop them, the kids ultimately manage to penetrate the secret of the twelve-yearly Solstice (whatever this phenomenon might be, one observes, it has nothing to do with the sun) and set matters straight.

The significant explanatory moment I promised earlier comes when Helen, Jack and Skeezix finally put all the pieces together, and break through the membrane separating them from a new realm of reality: One where unimaginable trains carry throngs of people backward and forward in time, with stops in all eras. For a brief moment all possibilities are theirs, all times and places open to them. Nothing is forbidden. They are become Illuminati, knowers of great secrets and holders of immense power.

They can't get back to their own world fast enough.

Power and knowledge hold no charm comparable to that of the world they know: A world in which the vibration of unseen machines is a constant whisper underfoot. Where strange events proliferate and disperse. Where revelation is always imminent but never arrives.

Skeezix, typically, gets the last word. Reflecting on life, he muses that "it seemed that the precariousness of the business lent a sort of flavor to it; it would be a dreary place all in all if his existence were mapped out too thoroughly."

It is precisely this love of the quotidian, of the homely, of simple pleasures and quirky people and natural oddities, that burns at the heart of Blaylock's art. This is why the digging leviathan was doomed to failure. This is why the subway system of the gods is discovered and abandoned. The world is enough, he suggests. Who could ask for more?

Iain Banks has the pleasant distinction of simultaneously holding down two separate literary careers, one as the mainstream author of such acclaimed works as *The Wasp Factory* and *Canal Dreams,* and the other as an equally admired science fiction writer.

I'll confess that I don't know which hat Banks was wearing when he wrote *The Bridge.* It hardly matters. What matters is the remarkable setting he has chosen for the bulk of the book—an enormous and seemingly endless bridge stretching from horizon to horizon across a nameless ocean. An entire society lives upon the bridge, employing bicycles, rickshaws, and motorcycles for short-term transportation and steam trains for longer voyages. Here is the scene from a platform above the main train deck:

> Over the noise of the milling people, the continual hisses and clanks, grindings and gratings, klaxons and whistles of the trains on the deck beneath sound like shrieks from some mechanistic underworld, while every now and again a deep rumble and a still more profound quaking and rattling announces a heavy train passing somewhere below; great pulsing clouds of white steam roll around the street and upwards. Above, where the sky ought to be, are the distant, hazily seen girders of the high bridge; obscured by the rising fumes and vapors, dimmed by the light intercepted outside them by their carapace of people-infected rooms and offices, they rise above and look down upon the rude profanity of these afterthought constructions with all the majesty and splendor of a great cathedral roof.

The first-person narrator is being treated for amnesia. He finds himself in a mannered society rather like that of Freud's Vienna but riddled with small absurdities, not the least of which is the total lack of curiosity its citizens display toward the bridge itself. What lands does it connect? Who built it? How old is it? Only the protagonist cares, and he cannot find out.

His sporadic search for answers is the chief of three alternating narratives. The second follows the life and difficult romance of a (young, at first) man in contemporary Scotland, and the third ... well, it can only be characterized as the adventures of Conan the Glaswegian.

At first the farcical adventures of a nearly brainless swordsman with an overintellectualized familiar and a truly hideous accent ("I luv the ded, this old basturt sez to me when I wiz tryin to get some innfurmashin out ov him. You fuckin old pervert I sez, gettin a bit fed up by this time enyway, and slit his throate; ah askd you whare the fukin Sleepin Byootie woz, no whit kind of humpin you like. No, no he sez, splutterin sumthin awfy and gettin blud all ovir ma new curiearse, no he sez I sed Isle of the Dead" and so on) seem jarring and even intrusive. There are moments in the main narration when the fabric of reality wears thin and opens a window into the second plot-line. But this barbarian stuff is straight out of left field.

These segments are so engaging, however, so funny in an awful way, that the reader comes to accept them while doubting they'll ever quite make sense.

The Bridge is, underneath all, a novel of psychological revelation. So I am forced to be a little coy about the plot. In broad terms, it is about the protagonist's reluctance to deal with the mystery of his situation. He is a man in serious peril and it is his task to discover the nature of that peril. However, life on the bridge is pleasant, and he has met an engaging woman, an engineer's daughter named Abberlaine Arrol.

The sections on the bridge are more vivid and engaging than those set in Scotland. The same could be said of the swaggering, cigar-smoking Abberlaine compared to her real-world counterpart. Small wonder that the protagonist is uneager to rock the boat. But little things start going wrong. Telephones cease to work for him. He loses his social position. Mad events proliferate. He must finally find the resolve to ask tough questions and face their consequences.

Morals are out of fashion these days, even in the retrogressive universes of fantasy. But if there is one message to be taken away from the book, it is this: That sometimes the reason life seems difficult is that we are engaged in difficult and important work.

And our foul-mouthed, sexually deplorable, and bloody-handed barbarian? One of the many delights of *The Bridge* is the marvelously orchestrated revelation by story's end that he is integral to the plot. Central, even.

Do I violate my own definition if I cite Ellen Kushner's *Swordspoint* as a hard fantasy? It's a tough call. The critic and editor Donald G. Keller denies that he took its subtitle, "A Melodrama of Manners," and used it to define a previously undiscerned school of fantasy which he called "fantasy of manners" and others puckishly dubbed "mannerpunk" before settling on the more sedate "mannerism." But there is no getting around the fact that *Swordspoint* has become the figurehead work for that nascent subgenre.

We are in dark waters here, murky with wrack and seaweed. Those clear, pellucid depths through which could be seen, fathoms deep, Grecian triremes with coral-encrusted amphorae holding ancient wine still drinkable, are no more. And whose fault should this be but science fiction's?

With the rise of science fiction as a genre, the currents of influence became tangled and recomplicated.[2] John Brunner's *The Traveler in Black* was strongly influenced by Lord Dunsany's exquisitely crafted tales from the kingdoms at the Edge of the World; Michael Moorcock's marvelous *Gloriana* was in part a conscious homage to the Gormenghast books, in token of which it is dedicated to Mervyn Peake; and Gene Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun* (a work in which on examination all the fantastic elements have hard science rationales—but what of that?) is a direct descendant of Jack Vance's *The Dying Earth,* which in its turn was clearly derived from Clark Ashton Smith's chronicles of the final civilizations of humanity. To name but a few examples.

The temptation to claim that the authors of these works have transformed their influences so thoroughly as to render these books fit for

2. For a good example of exactly *how* tangled, consider only Avram Davidson's *The Phoenix and the Mirror,* which employs the tools of hard science fiction to describe the creation of a virgin speculum (a mirror that has never known a reflection) couched strictly in the technology of the Roman Empire as it was later misunderstood by Dark Ages scholars.

our colonizing banner is strong. But, as a famous out-of-genre fantasist once put it, it would be wrong.

Still … water does not run uphill, nor do we inherit our looks from our grandchildren. The recognition by Wolfe, Vance, Moorcock, Brunner, that there was much to admire about their predecessors does not not invalidate those works they loved so dearly. *On the day it was published,* Kushner's *Swordspoint* was undeniably a hard fantasy.

But—this is a question the author herself has raised in conversation—is *Swordspoint* a fantasy at all? Well … if I can say this without challenging every rogue swordsman, masterless samurai and cheap gunsel with a gaudy line of patter to an exchange of definitions, it seems strange that so little has been made of the deep connection between fantasy and fantasies. By 'fantasies' I mean of course those pleasant meditations on the world not as it is but as we wish it were and know it cannot be. *Swordspoint* is a demonstration that it is not the furniture—the dragons, ogres, elves, and wizards, the magical swords, cups, and corkscrews—that make a work fantasy but that hopeless yearning vision of life as it cannot be that burns green and eternal at its heart.

But here. On the first page, Kushner sets the scene:

> Let the fairy-tale begin on a winter's morning, then, with one drop of blood new-fallen on the ivory snow: a drop as bright as a clear-cut ruby, red as the single spot of claret on the lace cuff. And it therefore follows that evil lurks behind each broken window, scheming malice and enchantment; while behind the latched shutters the good are sleeping their just sleeps at this early hour in Riverside. Soon they will arise to go about their business; and one, maybe, will be as lovely as the day, armed, as are the good, for a predestined triumph … .

This is an elegant stick of prose, but what is more important is what follows upon it. For it is immediately undercut by the next paragraph, which enumerates the lies, evasions and deliberate misleadings its predecessor employs. Leaving only the grace of the writing and an admirable warning of the unexpected turns of wit that will inform the narration of events.

This high wit is integral to the purpose of the novel. For the fantasy that drives this book and its characters is the vision of a life without

regrets or consequences, in which all that matters is making a figure of oneself and winning the admiration of a scorned universe. This is an equipose that cannot be maintained, though the swordsman Richard St. Vier tries hard, as do in their own ways the villainous Ferris, the duchess Tremontaine, and the callow Lord Michael. Even the human engine for the novel's events—Alec, failed student, St. Vier's lover, and proverbial Boyfriend From Hell—who knows from hard experience that it cannot be done, tries to hold the world in despite. Secretly, all know they are doomed.

In the face of this knowledge, only wit can keep them going. Posture is forever threatened by reality, for as Lord Ferris aphorises, *Every man lives at swordspoint*. "I mean," he explains, "the things he cares for. Get them in your grasp, and you have the man—or woman—in your power. Threaten what they love, and they are absolutely at your mercy: you have a very sharp blade pressed to their throat."

Can, then, a dissolute failed student find happiness witha swordsman whose self-image requires that he die young? Well … it *is*, after all, a fairy tale of sorts. But in a novel that begins with St. Vier vaulting a wall and running through lightless streets to escape not retribution for the murder he has just committed but the cloying compliments of the bystanders on his style, nothing is to be taken for granted.

There is a type of young woman we have all either known or been: who worships at the altar of the Romantic; plays old border ballads on pennywhistle, recorder, or hammer dulcimer; tacks a hand-lettered sign reading MAGIC IS AFOOT on her dormitory room door; reads the Tarot for friends and *The White Goddess* for pleasure; and treasures a hundred obscure books by measure of how close they come to an ideal world in which gypsies and scarecrows, old marbles and long skirts, elves, quilts, candles, hot chocolate with cinnamon, feathered caps, rainy days, and snug houses with big fireplaces are part of a single, inexpressibly significant enterprise. There have been attempts to set a novel in this young woman's world view, but those I have seen all (but I have not seen all) fall short of the mark by the same process that mars most stories about writers' friends. The heroine is gifted with such preternatural grace and good will, wit, insight, fighting skills and fashion sense as to make the reader either resolve to lose some weight and take in a few night classes at the university or else hurl the book across the room in disgust. Usually the latter.

This is not a mistake that Greer Ilene Gilman makes in *Moonwise*. Her heroine slouches through the novel submerged and half-lost in language, desperately in love with her invented worlds, faintly ridiculous, totally convincing, and altogether charming. Ariane is the type-specimen for her kind, and it is her absolute unquestioning belief in the immanence of the fantastic that allows the reader to accept it when those fantasies overswell their banks one evening and sweep away her best friend Sylvie in a torrent of words.

Here's a sample of *Moonwise*'s prose in a quieter moment:

> She remembered a game of croquet, played by mothlight on their cant of crooked lawn, amid the gangling bygone lilacs, and the rose-thorns and the currants, in the Lyonesse of dusk. Their set was old, the heavy balls and mallets battered colorless, and the iron wickets grim as Newgate gallows. It was a fierce and freakish game; the air was flawed with wild giggles, pibrochs of ecstatic fury, threats and jeers and ranting taunting triumphs. Ariane was battle-drunk, amazed by her own rapacity. The others played elusively, erratically as moths: now belantered in the bushes; now undone by the backlash of a clacking, cleverstick riposte; now flying with uncanny grace through hoops that should have been unassailable as rainbows. Ariane stonewalled. Her floating, fluttering muslin skirt was caught and rent, entangled in the thorns of roses, where she skulked with cunning strategy; the others unpicked her from the brambles.

Now, either you think there is something magnificent about a croquet game rendered thus, or you do not, and if you do not I fail to see how you will get past even the first chapter. Much less the genuinely difficult passage in which Sylvie disappears. This is a book in which dreams, memories, desires, and reality are not distinct, but merely regions on one continuum among whose convolutions one can lose oneself in an absent-minded moment. The shift in levels can occur within a single sentence, and honesty compels me to admit that there were times late at night when I felt I had been invited to fling off my shoes and dance through the brambles.

But a difficult style, it has been observed, is its own defense. It scares away the faint of heart. Once the reviewers and critics were done

with them, there is nobody who ever finished Frederick Rolfe's *Hadrian the Seventh* or Alexander Theroux's *Three Wogs* or Brian Aldiss's *Barefoot in the Head* with anything less than delight. *Moonwise* is a wilfully special book, whose partisans will be treasuring its virtues well into the long night of the coming century.

In its influence, *Moonwise* was certainly the most important fantasy work of the past decade for the simple reason that it roused an entire generation of new and unknown fantasy writers to Ambition. For a year after it came out, the conventions and writers' workshops buzzed with a constant mutter of amazement. A total unknown, with her first book, had reinvented not only the substance but also the language of the fantasy novel, all to the satisfaction not of the perceived marketplace but of her own inner demons. It inevitably raised the unspoken but potent question, If she can do it, then why not me? *Why not me?*

And, indeed ... why not?

The mutinous crew gather on the foredeck, every dwarf and man-jack of them outraged that their favorite works have been passed over. One cries out for Delia Sherman's *The Porcelain Dove.* Another for A.S. Byatt's *Possession.* A third for John M. Ford's *The Dragon Waiting,* and a fourth for something—anything!—by Tim Powers. Partisans demand Joy Chant, Poul Anderson, Andre Norton, Gregory Frost, Susan Cooper, Leigh Brackett, Fletcher Pratt. Everyone is angry that I have overlooked L. Sprague de Camp.

It is vain to point out that *The Porcelain Dove* is a historical fantasy and that historical fantasy is currently a growth literature, with enough going on in it to support any number of essays the length of this. That Byatt's book is not really a fantasy but, as she subtitled it, "A Romance" and has more in common with the works of the Sisters Brontë than with Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea tetralogy. That originality and good writing are not enough—to be included herein requires Blind Luck as well. That the cataloguing of islands is an arduous and—elder gods willing—endless task.

This satisfies nobody. One burly ruffian demands to know where R.A. Lafferty's work fits into this scheme. It doesn't, really, any more than does Neal Barrett, Jr.'s *The Hereafter Gang.* Some fish are so odd as to escape even our all-embracing net. Howard Waldrop is a good example. Is he still considered an outlaw fantasist? Does outlaw fantasy

even exist anymore? Linnaeus notwithstanding, a comprehensive taxonomy of fantasy is more than simply difficult. The mere thought of it is a nightmare.

The crew will not listen. Their passions are aroused. Eyes flash. Knives glint. Mystic runes on blades and hilts glow with murderous intent.

But a muttered word of power stills them all. Voices fade. The ship recedes, becomes nothing more than a figure on the written page, harmless. I take up the typed sheets of this essay, tamp their edges even, and reach for an envelope.

Beyond the limited horizons of these pages, a hundred fantastic islands appear in the distance like waterspouts, like strange similes, like exotic flowers blossoming from so many gun-barrels. It was never my ambition to chart out the Archipelago and pin its isles down on paper like so many dead butterflies. Rather it was to set out a direction for travel.

It curls like a sleeping dragon, does the Archipelago. No man knows the shape and nature of the submarine geologic forces that brought it into being. We can only conjecture what sea-changing currents wash its divergent shores. Our voyage has brought us to the heart of words, of yearning, to that form of literature in which the nature of each is blended with the other and their essence is revealed to be the transformation from the unbearable What Is to the unreachable If Only.

Algis Budrys once remarked that hard science fiction was not a subgenre but a flavor, the flavor of "toughness." If hard fantasy has a flavor, then surely that flavor must be "regret." And if I have one regret, it is that there is for me neither the time nor the space nor yet the wisdom to lay out for you all the many lands and wonders to be found scattered through the Archipelago. I have failed you. Yet if there be but one book mentioned here you have not yet sampled, I leave you better off than you were when first we met.

Here, good milords and fine ladies, I must leave your presence, for we have arrived at that destination we were fated for since time began, that happy condition that was our object from the very onset of our quest: A most excellent beginning.

And so we set sail.

Growing Up in the Future

I have been to Chicago only twice, both times to attend the Worldcon. Once was in the early eighties, the other late in the decade. Something had changed between visits. The first time I went, it was still the present; but by the second time, it had become the future.

I first noticed this on the plane. On the back of the seat before me was a cordless phone which could be released with a swipe of my credit card. In O'Hare Airport I took the slidewalk into the terminal and ducked into the men's room, where I found that the sinks and toilets and urinals no longer had mechanical levers. They were operated by infrared sensors. A friend of mine, who was wearing black, had to hold his handkerchief up to the sink in order to wash his hands. At the hotel a clerk placed a cardboard chit into a machine which imprinted a small magnetic strip with a random code and then directed the door of my room to recognize it. Then she told me I could pay my bill on my television set on channel 11 and also check there to see if I had any email. And she didn't even bother to explain to me what she was talking about!

She knew she didn't have to. Because we were all citizens of the future now.

I don't find myself a particularly interesting subject. But I have lived through some extremely interesting times. Specifically, I grew up at a time unique in history, when "the future" was a living force, something imminent and powerful, and have lived long enough to see it arrive, be swallowed up by the culture, and disappear.

I'm going to give a quick sketch of the future. Where it came from, what it was, and what became of it. It is my thesis that "the future" is a post–World War II phenomenon. Immediately I can hear you object—what about Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke, and any number of others in our field who were writing before the war? But these were not ordinary men. They were visionaries. And I use that word neither rhetorically nor in a mystical sense. By visionary, I mean simply that they saw something that most people could not. When Asimov, Heinlein and Clarke were young, science fiction was a thoroughly despised genre. The claim that a rocket would someday be put into orbit or travel to the Moon, much less take human beings along with it, was to most people patently untrue. Science fiction writers faced not just skepticism but open scorn. It took a lot more strength of character and independence of thought for them to write about a future that was more than just a degraded form of the present—a little thicker about the waist, a bit grayer around the muzzle—than it later would for, let's say, me.

World War Two changed everything. It was a time of greatly accelerated technological research and development. A lot of amateurs and theoreticians were moved from the fringes of society, from the *Verein für Raumschiffahrt,* for example, to the very center of the war effort—to Peenemünde. And when it was over, the surge in research did not end. When Wernher von Braun—of whom it has been written, "He aimed for the stars and hit London"—came to the United States, he brought with him the entire space program in a stack of notebooks with tables of exhaust velocities and colored diagrams of every space vehicle it would take to proceed step by step to the moon, Mars, and beyond. (I first heard of these fabled notebooks from an engineer who had worked at the White Sands proving grounds as the same time as von Braun; he particularly admired how von Braun marched his engineers out onto the field every morning for military inspection before they were put to work.)

Because of the Cold War, and because of the decisive role new technology had played in the Battle of Britain and places like Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Federal government continued to invest heavily in research. The corporations benefiting from this largesse as a matter of course put out their own benign propaganda on what they were up to, and how we could all expect to benefit from it. The future for the first time found committed corporate sponsorship.

I was born in 1950, and my father was an engineer. He worked for General Electric, and I very much regret that I can't tell you exactly what he did. I can't tell you because I don't know. His work required security clearance from the FBI and under the terms of that clearance he was not allowed to say. But by testimony of the unclassified handouts and promotional materials he brought home, he was involved in the space program; and by testimony of things said at company picnics by less scrupulously silent employees, he was probably also involved in nuclear weapon delivery systems—intercontinental ballistic missiles. So that for good and ill he was right at the heart of the two central enterprises of our civilization at mid-century.

As a result, I grew up with the future. At age six I used to go through my father's stacks of *Popular Science* and *Mechanix Illustrated*, which along with articles about car repair and hi-fi kits you could build yourself, contained articles by Willy Ley, G. Harry Stein, Eando Binder, and even von Braun himself, all about the wonders I could expect to see in my lifetime: A moon landing in 1975, expeditions to Mars and Venus by 1985. My father and I used to rebuild old radios on Sunday afternoons, and I saved the surplus vacuum tubes for inventions I was going to astound the world with, just as soon as I was old enough to use a soldering iron.

Oh, the future was everywhere in those days! The New York World's Fair had mechanized dioramas by all the major corporations showing what it would be like: microwave ovens and undersea cities, giant road-building machines slicing through thousand-year-old trees to bring civilization to the jungle, real working videophones, vacation pleasure-domes dug out of the Antarctic ice.

These promises were all most specific. They were on the drawing boards. General Electric's Schenectady plant pumped out inventions at a fabulous rate. One of our neighbors was the co-inventor of the artificial diamond. Artificial diamonds! Could there be a better symbol of the wealth and technologically-based glamour that was headed straight our way? Atomic power plants were going to generate limitless power at a rate too cheap to bother metering. "Clean" nuclear bombs would dig transcontinental canals and enormous new harbors, fusing useless wetlands into neovolcanic bedrock upon which we could build skyscrapers a mile high! Icebergs with robotic rigging would be sailed into these harbors to provide fresh water and cooling breezes in the summer.

All of which, among other things, made it very easy to grow up into a science fiction writer. I remember a picture my father brought home from work, an artist's rendering of a lunar colony based on General Electric technology. It showed stiff, '50's-type people strolling within a domed crater, the sides of which had been contoured in a series of gardened terraces. A quarter century later, I used that image as a starting point for my own lunar colony in a novella called "Griffin's Egg." And though I worked some radical changes on that vision, it still had the core power of being a real place that I could believe in existing. It was something I had been promised as a child.

There were dark aspects to the future back then. World War Three *was* expected, and soon. And I will never forget how I felt in 1957, crouching in the dark of my attic bedroom with my ear against the console radio that my father and I had salvaged and repaired—I had the sound as low as it would go because I was supposed to be asleep—listening to the news that the Russians had put an artificial satellite into orbit ahead of us. That it was up there now. That they could now put bombs into orbit and there was nothing we could do to defend ourselves against them.

But those were aberrations. They weren't what the future was really about. The future was more like an incident that happened the very next summer.

I was reading a book in my room when I heard a world-shaking throb of motors from outside. I ran out and looked up and there above me, flying low over the neighborhood, was a dirigible. It was enormous! It filled the sky—huge, detailed and shadowless, incredible, looking like the inside of Hugo Gernsback's head. It slid overhead so slowly it seemed you could almost keep up with it just by walking.

I ran down the street after it.

And as I ran, all over the neighborhood, doors slammed open and people came out into their yards to gawk. The adults stood there, staring up. But the children—all of them—ran out into the street and after it. Waves of children all running as hard and fast as we could, trying desperately to catch up with it. Slowly the dirigible pulled away, growing smaller, dwindling in the sky. While down below in its shadow, wave after wave of children poured out of their houses and ran until they could run no more, and staggered to a stop, and stood staring up while new children ran out after it.

Nobody ran harder than me. Nobody ran faster. When the others fell behind, I kept on running.

In a sense, I am still chasing after that dirigible.

That future is gone now. It disappeared at about the same time as the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was seen as being, like the space program that was so much a part of it, a tool of the Cold War. Which it was. It was a Consumer Utopia that could be pitted against the Communist future of a Worker's Paradise. Disposable paper clothing! Rocket packs! Robots that would clear the table and wash the dishes for you! A lot of explicit promises—I'm thinking specifically of the twenty-hour work week which (you could look it up) we were expected to achieve by the year 2000—were broken. The enemy was defeated and the future was swept back into the box.

Why did we give up on it so easily? Two reasons, I think, both the result of the future being too successfully absorbed by the culture.

For a time in the seventies, I held a number of low-paying jobs as information analyst for the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia. In one of these I shared an office with Sandy Meschkow, who had possession of America's Energy Future and occasionally let me play with it.

America's Energy Future was a teaching device which the Department of Energy had devised. It was a box containing a handful of transistors (this was before personal computers), a few potentiometers, and several simple readouts, and it represented civilization. With one set of dials you could set the society's energy demands—so much for transportation, so much for heating, for research, and so on. With another, you set the mix of energy resources—hydroelectric, oil, coal, nuclear, solar. Each had advantages and disadvantages. Oil, coal, nuclear were all convenient but they polluted. Hydroelectric was clean, but could only grow until all the major rivers had been dammed. Solar was clean but it came on line slowly. You set your mix of uses and sources and flipped a switch. Readouts showed demand compared to supply and consequences. A big flickering readout gave the year. The game was to see how long you could keep society going in the face of an energy demand that grew asymptotically.

A really good player—which is to say one with a total disregard for the civil liberties of his subject population—could get the numbers up a hundred years into the future before civilization seized up and col-

lapsed into a state of depleted and thoroughly polluted barbarism. Liberal democracies fared less well.

After a while it became obvious to me that not only was there no way to win this depressing game but that it was an accurate model for DOE's energy policies. They were all based on an irreversible demand for energy that would grow at a steadily increasing rate until everything collapsed and everyone died. You couldn't win. But if you used up all your resources without a thought for tomorrow, they wouldn't run out until just shortly after the last middle-aged decision-maker died.

What had begun as a tool was now calling the shots. The future with its limitless vistas of technological freedoms had become an oppressive argument of futility and despair.

That's one reason.

The second reason we gave up on the future was far stranger:

Sometime during the eighties, about the time of my second visit to Chicago, the future became a colonized precinct of the present. People came to believe in the predictions and technologies of the future in a way that previously not even science fiction did. They accepted them as having a literal rather than provisional existence.

Virtual reality is a particularly good example of this process. You can go into any schoolyard in the world and ask the fourth-graders there to explain how it works and what it does, and they'll do it! In numbing detail. This in spite of the fact that nothing currently available to them comes anywhere close to living up to the sort of thing they describe.

Virtual is an anticipatory technology. It doesn't exist yet. But so pervasive a part of the culture has it become that we're all secretly convinced that somewhere, somehow, it must. That down some sleazy back alley in Hong Kong, if you knock on the right door and offer enough money, you can get the real thing.

The same process applies to nanotechnology, genetic engineering, any number of technologies that are living on accomplishments borrowed from future research. How many people have bought into the Web in order to obtain services and benefits that are *surely* out there somewhere, if you could only get the address for them?[1] All these things

1. When I delivered this speech, this line got a *big* laugh of recognition. Two years later, in an interview at a human-computer interface conference, I said much the same thing and somebody asked, "Well, what kind of sites are you looking for?" And in that instant, everyone in the room leaned forward, eager to discover an uncapitalized niche. The future comes barreling down on us fast—at a rate of sixty minutes per hour.

have become the stuff not of science fiction but of the speculative present.

At the same time, inevitably much of what was predicted forty years ago, for good and ill, has come true, and inevitably it isn't quite as entertaining as it was supposed to be. We still suffer heartache and disappointment. We're still human.

The future is easy to see when it's large and off in the distance, like a dirigible filling the sky. Not so easy when it's upon you. You stop paying attention, and it disappears.

There's a trick I like to pull on my friends. Standing in a large city on an overcast night, I'll ask them to look down at the sidewalk and tell me what color the sky is. They invariably will say black or, sometimes, dark blue. Look up, I'll say. And to their astonishment the sky is neither black nor blue, but a dull, smoky red—reflecting the orange glow of all those sodium and mercury vapor streetlights.

I've never seen this fact mentioned in present-fiction, despite its being fiction's job to bring us news of the world as it is.

Alas, most science fiction does not fare much better.

We've overrun the future, and yet many of us don't seem to have noticed this fact. You'll see stories containing astronauts and laser guns, pocket satellite uplinks, and casual genetic engineering which present themselves as being science fiction when really all they are is inaccurate present-fiction.

Simultaneous with our overtaking the future, we as a society have lost all belief in it. All the bright and clever toys the future was going to bring—we're too smart for that now. The space program is a perfect example of this. A quarter-century ago men walked on the moon. Now the closest thing to a space program we have is a Tom Hanks movie.

Or rather, that's what we like to tell each other. My wife has an office job and she reports that time and time again the dead white males get together to grouse about how the space program was a failure. Which is when Marianne will point out that there are astronauts—or, more often, cosmonauts—in orbit *right now.*

They simply look at her. They don't understand what she's getting at.

But her point—and this is my point as well—is that just because we're done with *it,* doesn't mean the future is done with *us.* Because what we call the future is not a place or a thing. Rather, it is a visionary

take on the present. It is a projection of what we are currently working to make happen.

So when people stop believing in the future, we are not merely losing a set of brightly colored conceptual toys. We are refusing to look at the consequences of our present. And when we cease to look and plan, we fall back on the default settings, on our unspoken and largely unconscious expectations of what the future will be.

If you look at what we collectively expect nowadays, it's all ecological collapse, the inevitable extinction of species, and the slow degradation of the environment leading inexorably to the painful death of the human race. That's the message I see playing over and over again on television, and hear being taught in the schools. The current implicit future is a tedious thing indeed. The only bright spot in which appears to be that with teledildonics we'll be able to access virtual prostitution without fear of disease or human contact. But mostly it's going to be just a degraded version of the present—a little grayer around the muzzle, a few more pounds around the waist.

Almost nobody believes in the future today, any more than they believe in the space program. It's not the sixties anymore, they say, we're broke, and it's been decades since anyone was in orbit. But meanwhile the human race has more real wealth than ever before. Epidemics are so rare in this country that when a relatively minor one comes along and kills a few tens of thousands of people, we think something's wrong. India, which was once synonymous with famine, is now a food-exporting nation. Our space probes are smaller and smarter than ever before. There are men *and women* in orbit at this very moment.

So where does that leave us?

Oddly enough, it leaves us in pretty much the same situation that Isaac Asimov and Robert Heinlein and Arthur C. Clarke found themselves fifty-some years ago. Privy to a secret that most people don't want to hear: That there is a future. It's coming and it's not going to be at all like today. It's going to be better than you can imagine. It's going to be unspeakably worse.

Over the years I've sold a number of stories to *Omni,* in both its print and electronic incarnations. As a result, people working on non-fiction articles about the future of shoes, offices, pets, whatever, will occasionally call up looking for a few free predictions. I try to accommodate them. I tell them that in the future everybody will go barefoot,

that our offices will be a set of interactive sunglasses which we'll be more likely to misplace on Mondays than any other day, and that internal microscopic interfaces will allow us to maintain colonies of harmless and colorful bacteria and even viruses as pets within our bloodstreams. Whatever I happen to have been thinking about lately. But it usually turns out that what they're *really* looking for is new money-making ideas: wine spritzers and Post-It notes are the most common examples they give me. And here I can't help them. Because the only money-making ideas I'm interested in are ideas for new stories.

But in that one limited sense I can tell you exactly where the money is. And that is, in new futures. Futures that are not derived from earlier science fiction. That are not disguised versions of the present. That are not literary metaphors for anything, but real and honest projections.

This is not all that science fiction does, or ought to do—far from it. Indeed, I could argue that accurate predictions are the least interesting product we put out. The late Will Jenkins, who wrote under the name of Murray Leinster, was also an inventor. He told me once that he'd get an idea for something new and then think about it for a long time, puzzling it over, until either he could make it work or he understood why it never would. If it worked, he'd patent it. If he didn't, he'd write a science fiction story in which it did.

Murray Leinster once wrote a story about a device that puts matter out of phase with the surrounding world, so that it can slip through the spaces between atoms undisturbed. Criminals steal the device and rig it into a submarine. The matter-phaser is tunable, so that the submarine's propellers can push against bedrock with the same force as they would water. They then proceed to travel undetectably under the ground, emerging inside bank vaults to plunder and loot. This was a clear example of an unpatentable idea.

Robert Heinlein, in contrast, made any number of predictions that were spot-on. In *The Door into Summer* he predicted computer banking, Ticketron, and computer-assisted design, among other things. But ironically enough his descriptions of these are tedious to read now that they've come true—I know how Ticketron works, thank you—where Leinster's description of the criminals in their submarine, its matter-phaser sabotaged, falling helplessly through the Earth, down, down, down toward the molten core as the air runs out and the heat inexorably builds is still riveting.

Nonsense, but riveting.

I think that science fiction is like that submarine: just a little out of phase with reality, but enough in touch with it to have something to push against. And that which we push against, react to and oppose, journey away from and return home to, is the future. It's our bedrock. It's our home port. Sometimes in our imaginations we travel far, far afield. But it's always there, waiting for us.

So long as we keep our faith in it, we'll do just fine.

Griffin's Egg

The sun cleared the mountains. Gunther Weil raised a hand in salute, then winced as the glare hit his eyes in the instant it took his helmet to polarize.

He was hauling fuel rods to Chatterjee Crater industrial park. The Chatterjee B reactor had gone critical forty hours before dawn, taking fifteen remotes and a microwave relay with it, and putting out a power surge that caused collateral damage to every factory in the park. Fortunately, the occasional meltdown was designed into the system. By the time the sun rose over the Rhaeticus highlands, a new reactor had been built and was ready to go online.

Gunther drove automatically, gauging his distance from Bootstrap by the amount of trash lining the Mare Vaporum road. Close by the city, discarded construction machinery and damaged assemblers sat in open-vacuum storage, awaiting possible salvage. Ten kilometers out, a pressurized van had exploded, scattering machine parts and giant worms of insulating foam across the landscape. At twenty-five kilometers, a poorly graded stretch of road had claimed any number of cargo skids and shattered running lights from passing traffic.

Forty kilometers out, though, the road was clear, a straight, clean gash in the dirt. Ignoring the voices at the back of his skull, the traffic chatter and automated safety messages that the truck routinely fed into his transceiver chip, he scrolled up the topographicals on the dash.

Right about here.

Gunther turned off the Mare Vaporum road and began laying tracks over virgin soil. "You've left your pre-scheduled route," the truck said.

"Deviations from schedule may only be made with the recorded permission of your dispatcher."

"Yeah, well." Gunther's voice seemed loud in his helmet, the only physical sound in a babel of ghosts. He'd left the cabin unpressurized, and the insulated layers of his suit stilled even the conduction rumbling from the treads. "You and I both know that so long as I don't fall too far behind schedule, Beth Hamilton isn't going to care if I stray a little in between."

"You have exceeded this unit's linguistic capabilities."

"That's okay, don't let it bother you." Deftly he tied down the send switch on the truck radio with a twist of wire. The voices in his head abruptly died. He was completely isolated now.

"You said you wouldn't do that again." The words, broadcast directly to his trance chip, sounded as deep and resonant as the voice of God. "Generation Five policy expressly requires that all drivers maintain constant radio—"

"Don't whine. It's unattractive."

"You have exceeded this unit's linguistic—"

"Oh, shut up." Gunther ran a finger over the topographical maps, tracing the course he'd plotted the night before: Thirty kilometers over cherry soil, terrain no human or machine had ever crossed before, and then north on Murchison road. With luck he might even manage to be at Chatterjee early.

He drove into the lunar plain. Rocks sailed by to either side. Ahead, the mountains grew imperceptibly. Save for the trademarks dwindling behind him, there was nothing from horizon to horizon to show that humanity had ever existed. The silence was perfect.

Gunther lived for moments like this. Entering that clean, desolate emptiness, he experienced a vast expansion of being, as if everything he saw, stars, plain, craters and all, were encompassed within himself. Bootstrap City was only a fading dream, a distant island on the gently rolling surface of a stone sea. Nobody will ever be first here again, he thought. Only me.

A memory floated up from his childhood. It was Christmas eve and he was in his parents' car, on the way to midnight Mass. Snow was falling, thickly and windlessly, rendering all the familiar roads of Düsseldorf clean and pure under sheets of white. His father drove, and he

himself leaned over the front seat to stare ahead in fascination into this peaceful, transformed world. The silence was perfect.

He felt touched by solitude and made holy.

The truck plowed through a rainbow of soft greys, submerged hues more hints than colors, as if something bright and festive held itself hidden just beneath a coating of dust. The sun was at his shoulder, and when he spun the front axle to avoid a boulder, the truck's shadow wheeled and reached for infinity. He drove reflexively, mesmerized by the austere beauty of the passing land.

At a thought, his peecee put music on his chip. *Stormy Weather* filled the universe.

He was coming down a long, almost imperceptible slope when the controls went dead in his hands. The truck powered down and coasted to a stop. "Goddamn you, you asshole machine!" he snarled. "What is it this time?"

"The land ahead is impassable."

Gunther slammed a fist on the dash, making the maps dance. The land ahead was smooth and sloping, any unruly tendencies tamed eons ago by the Mare Imbrium explosion. Sissy stuff. He kicked the door open and clambered down.

The truck had been stopped by a baby rille: a snakelike depression meandering across his intended route, looking for all the world like a dry streambed. He bounded to its edge. It was fifteen meters across, and three meters down at its deepest. Just shallow enough that it wouldn't show up on the topos. Gunther returned to the cab, slamming the door noiselessly behind him.

"Look. The sides aren't very steep. I've been down worse a hundred times. We'll just take it slow and easy, okay?"

"The land ahead is impassable," the truck said. "Please return to the originally scheduled course."

Wagner was on now. *Tannhäuser*. Impatiently, he thought it off.

"If you're so damned heuristic, then why won't you ever listen to reason?" He chewed his lip angrily, gave a quick shake of his head. "No, going back would put us way off schedule. The rille is bound to peter out in a few hundred meters. Let's just follow it until it does, then angle back to Murchison. We'll be at the park in no time."

Three hours later he finally hit the Murchison road. By then he was sweaty and smelly and his shoulders ached with tension. "Where are we?" he asked sourly. Then, before the truck could answer, "Cancel that." The soil had turned suddenly black. That would be the ejecta fantail from the Sony-Reinpfaltz mine. Their railgun was oriented almost due south in order to avoid the client factories, and so their tailings hit the road first. That meant he was getting close.

Murchison was little more than a confluence of truck treads, a dirt track crudely leveled and marked by blazes of orange paint on nearby boulders. In quick order Gunther passed through a series of landmarks: Harada Industrial fantail, Sea of Storms Macrofacturing fantail, Krupp fünfzig fantail. He knew them all. G5 did the robotics for the lot.

A light flatbed carrying a shipped bulldozer sped past him, kicking up a spray of dust that fell as fast as pebbles. The remote driving it waved a spindly arm in greeting. He waved back automatically, and wondered if it was anybody he knew.

The land hereabouts was hacked and gouged, dirt and boulders shoved into careless heaps and hills, the occasional tool station or Oxytank Emergency Storage Platform chopped into a nearby bluff. A sign floated by: TOILET FLUSHING FACILITIES 1/2 KILOMETER. He made a face. Then he remembered that his radio was still off and slipped the loop of wire from it. Time to rejoin the real world. Immediately his dispatcher's voice, harsh and static-y, was relayed to his trance chip.

"—ofabitch! Weil! Where the fuck are you?"

"I'm right here, Beth. A little late, but right where I'm supposed to be."

"Sonofa—" The recording shut off, and Hamilton's voice came on, live and mean. "You'd better have a real good explanation for this one, honey."

"Oh, you know how it is." Gunther looked away from the road, off into the dusty jade highlands. He'd like to climb up into them and never come back. Perhaps he would find caves. Perhaps there were monsters: vacuum trolls and moondragons with metabolisms slow and patient, taking centuries to move one body's-length, hyperdense beings that could swim through stone as if it were water. He pictured them diving, following lines of magnetic force deep, deep into veins of dia-

mond and plutonium, heads back and singing. "I picked up a hitchhiker, and we kind of got involved."

"Try telling that to E. Izmailova. She's mad as hornets at you."

"Who?"

"Izmailova. She's the new demolitions jock, shipped up here on a multicorporate contract. Took a hopper in almost four hours ago, and she's been waiting for you and Siegfried ever since. I take it you've never met her?"

"No."

"Well, I have, and you'd better watch your step with her. She's exactly the kind of tough broad who won't be amused by your antics."

"Aw, come on, she's just another tech on a retainer, right? Not in my line of command. It's not like she can do anything to me."

"Dream on, babe. It wouldn't take much pull to get a fuckup like you sent down to Earth."

The sun was only a finger's breadth over the highlands by the time Chatterjee A loomed into sight. Gunther glanced at it every now and then, apprehensively. With his visor adjusted to the H-alpha wavelength, it was a blazing white sphere covered with slowly churning black specks: more granular than usual. Sunspot activity seemed high. He wondered that the Radiation Forecast Facility hadn't posted a surface advisory. The guys at the Observatory were usually right on top of things.

Chatterjee A, B, and C were a triad of simple craters just below Chladni, and while the smaller two were of minimal interest, Chatterjee A was the child of a meteor that had punched through the Imbrian basalts to as sweet a vein of aluminum ore as anything in the highlands. Being so convenient to Bootstrap made it one of management's darlings, and Gunther was not surprised to see that Kerr-McGee was going all out to get their reactor online again.

The park was crawling with walkers, stalkers and assemblers. They were all over the blister-domed factories, the smelteries, loading docks and vacuum garages. Constellations of blue sparks winked on and off as major industrial constructs were dismantled. Fleets of heavily-loaded trucks fanned out into the lunar plain, churning up the dirt behind them. Fats Waller started to sing *The Joint Is Jumping* and Gunther laughed.

He slowed to a crawl, swung wide to avoid a gas-plater that was being wrangled onto a loader, and cut up the Chatterjee B ramp road.

A new landing pad had been blasted from the rock just below the lip, and a cluster of people stood about a hopper resting there. One human and eight remotes.

One of the remotes was speaking, making choppy little gestures with its arms. Several stood inert, identical as so many antique telephones, unclaimed by Earthside management but available should more advisors need to be called online.

Gunther unstrapped Siegfried from the roof of the cab and, control pad in one hand and cable spool in the other, walked him toward the hopper.

The human strode out to meet him. "You! What kept you?" E. Izmailova wore a jazzy red-and-orange Studio Volga boutique suit, in sharp contrast to his own company-issue suit with the G5 logo on the chest. He could not make out her face through the gold visor glass. But he could hear it in her voice: blazing eyes, thin lips.

"I had a flat tire." He found a good smooth chunk of rock and set down the cable spool, wriggling it to make sure it sat flush. "We got maybe five hundred yards of shielded cable. That enough for you?"

A short, tense nod.

"Okay." He unholstered his bolt gun. "Stand back." Kneeling, he anchored the spool to the rock. Then he ran a quick check of the unit's functions. "Do we know what it's like in there?"

A remote came to life, stepped forward and identified himself as Don Sakai, of G5's crisis management team. Gunther had worked with him before: a decent enough guy, but like most Canadians he had an exaggerated fear of nuclear energy. "Ms. Lang here, of Sony-Reinpfaltz, walked her unit in but the radiation was so strong she lost control after a preliminary scan." A second remote nodded confirmation, but the relay time to Toronto was just enough that Sakai missed it. "The remote just kept on walking." He coughed nervously, then added unnecessarily, "The autonomous circuits were too sensitive."

"Well, that's not going to be a problem with Siegfried. He's as dumb as a rock. On the evolutionary scale of machine intelligence he ranks closer to a crowbar than a computer." Two and a half seconds passed, and then Sakai laughed politely. Gunther nodded to Izmailova. "Walk me through this. Tell me what you want."

Izmailova stepped to his side, their suits pressing together briefly as she jacked a patch cord into his control pad. Vague shapes flickered

across the outside of her visor like the shadows of dreams. "Does he know what he's doing?" she asked.

"Hey, I—"

"Shut up, Weil," Hamilton growled on a private circuit. Openly, she said, "He wouldn't be here if the company didn't have full confidence in his technical skills."

"I'm sure there's never been any question—" Sakai began. He lapsed into silence as Hamilton's words belatedly reached him.

"There's a device on the hopper," Izmailova said to Gunther. "Go pick it up."

He obeyed, reconfiguring Siegfried for a small, dense load. The unit bent low over the hopper, wrapping large, sensitive hands about the device. Gunther applied gentle pressure. Nothing happened. Heavy little bugger. Slowly, carefully, he upped the power. Siegfried straightened.

"Up the road, then down inside."

The reactor was unrecognizable, melted, twisted and folded in upon itself, a mound of slag with twisting pipes sprouting from the edges. There had been a coolant explosion early in the incident, and one wall of the crater was bright with sprayed metal. "Where is the radioactive material?" Sakai asked. Even though he was a third of a million kilometers away, he sounded tense and apprehensive.

"It's all radioactive," Izmailova said.

They waited. "I mean, you know. The fuel rods?"

"Right now, your fuel rods are probably three hundred meters down and still going. We are talking about fissionable material that has achieved critical mass. Very early in the process the rods will have all melted together in a sort of superhot puddle, capable of burning its way through rock. Picture it as a dense, heavy blob of wax, slowly working its way toward the lunar core."

"God, I love physics," Gunther said.

Izmailova's helmet turned toward him, abruptly blank. After a long pause, it switched on again and turned away. "The road down is clear at least. Take your unit all the way to the end. There's an exploratory shaft to one side there. Old one. I want to see if it's still open."

"Will the one device be enough?" Sakai asked. "To clean up the crater, I mean."

The woman's attention was fixed on Siegfried's progress. In a distracted tone she said, "Mr. Sakai, putting a chain across the access road

would be enough to clean up this site. The crater walls would shield anyone working nearby from the gamma radiation, and it would take no effort at all to reroute hopper overflights so their passengers would not be exposed. Most of the biological danger of a reactor meltdown comes from alpha radiation emitted by particulate radioisotopes in the air or water. When concentrated in the body, alpha-emitters can do considerable damage; elsewhere, no. Alpha particles can be stopped by a sheet of paper. So long as you keep a reactor out of your ecosystem, it's as safe as any other large machine. Burying a destroyed reactor just because it is radioactive is unnecessary and, if you will forgive me for saying so, superstitious. But I don't make policy. I just blow things up."

"Is this the shaft you're looking for?" Gunther asked.

"Yes. Walk it down to the bottom. It's not far."

Gunther switched on Siegfried's chestlight, and sank a roller relay so the cable wouldn't snag. They went down. Finally Izmailova said, "Stop. That's far enough." He gently set the device down and then, at her direction, flicked the arming toggle. "That's done," Izmailova said. "Bring your unit back. I've given you an hour to put some distance between the crater and yourself." Gunther noticed that the remotes, on automatic, had already begun walking away.

"Um … I've still got fuel rods to load."

"Not today you don't. The new reactor has been taken back apart and hauled out of the blasting zone."

Gunther thought now of all the machinery being disassembled and removed from the industrial park, and was struck for the first time by the operation's sheer extravagance of scale. Normally only the most sensitive devices were removed from a blasting area. "Wait a minute. Just what kind of monster explosive are you planning to use?"

There was a self-conscious cockiness to Izmailova's stance. "Nothing I don't know how to handle. This is a diplomat-class device, the same design as saw action five years ago. Nearly one hundred individual applications without a single mechanical failure. That makes it the most reliable weapon in the history of warfare. You should feel privileged having the chance to work with one."

Gunther felt his flesh turn to ice. "Jesus Mother of God," he said. "You had me handling a briefcase nuke."

"Better get used to it. Westinghouse Lunar is putting these little babies into mass production. We'll be cracking open mountains with

them, blasting roads through the highlands, smashing apart the rille walls to see what's inside." Her voice took on a visionary tone. "And that's just the beginning. There are plans for enrichment fields in Sinus Aestum. Explode a few bombs over the regolith, then extract plutonium from the dirt. We're going to be the fuel dump for the entire solar system."

His dismay must have shown in his stance, for Izmailova laughed. "Think of it as weapons for peace."

"You should've been there!" Gunther said. "It was unfuckabelievable. The one side of the crater just disappeared. It dissolved into nothing. Smashed to dust. And for a real long time everything glowed! Craters, machines, everything. My visor was so close to overload it started flickering. I thought it was going to burn out. It was nuts." He picked up his cards. "Who dealt this mess?"

Krishna grinned shyly and ducked his head. "I'm in."

Hiro scowled down at his cards. "I've just died and gone to Hell."

"Trade you," Anya said.

"No, I deserve to suffer."

They were in Noguchi Park by the edge of the central lake, seated on artfully scattered boulders that had been carved to look water-eroded. A knee-high forest of baby birches grew to one side, and somebody's toy sailboat floated near the impact cone at the center of the lake. Honeybees mazily browsed the clover.

"And then, just as the wall was crumbling, this crazy Russian bitch—"

Anya ditched a trey. "Watch what you say about crazy Russian bitches."

"—goes zooming up on her hopper …"

"I saw it on television," Hiro said. "We all did. It was news. This guy who works for Nissan told me the BBC gave it thirty seconds." He'd broken his nose in karate practice, when he'd flinched into his instructor's punch, and the contrast of square white bandage with shaggy black eyebrows gave him a surly, piratical appearance.

Gunther discarded one. "Hit me. Man, you didn't see anything. You didn't feel the ground shake afterwards."

"Just what was Izmailova's connection with the Briefcase War?" Hiro asked. "Obviously not a courier. Was she in the supply end or strategic?"

Gunther shrugged.

"You do remember the Briefcase War?" Hiro said sarcastically. "Half of Earth's military elites taken out in a single day? The world pulled back from the brink of war by bold action? Suspected terrorists revealed as global heroes?"

Gunther remembered the Briefcase War quite well. He had been nineteen at the time, working on a Finlandia Geothermal project when the whole world had gone into spasm and very nearly destroyed itself. It had been a major factor in his decision to ship off the planet. "Can't we ever talk about anything but politics? I'm sick and tired of hearing about Armageddon."

"Hey, aren't you supposed to be meeting with Hamilton?" Anya asked suddenly.

He glanced up at the Earth. The east coast of South America was just crossing the dusk terminator. "Oh, hell, there's enough time to play out the hand."

Krishna won with three queens. The deal passed to Hiro. He shuffled quickly, and slapped the cards down with angry little punches of his arm. "Okay," Anya said, "what's eating you?"

He looked up angrily, then down again and in a muffled voice, as if he had abruptly gone bashful as Krishna, said, "I'm shipping home."

"Home?"

"You mean to Earth?"

"Are you crazy? With everything about to go up in flames? Why?"

"Because I am so fucking tired of the Moon. It has to be the ugliest place in the universe."

"Ugly?" Anya looked elaborately about at the terraced gardens, the streams that began at the top level and fell in eight misty waterfalls before reaching the central pond to be recirculated again, the gracefully winding pathways. People strolled through great looping rosebushes and past towers of forsythia with the dreamlike skimming stride that made moonwalking so like motion underwater. Others popped in and out of the office tunnels, paused to watch the finches loop and fly, tended to beds of cucumbers. At the midlevel straw market, the tents where off-duty hobby capitalists sold factory systems, grass baskets, orange glass paperweights and courses in postinterpretive dance and the meme analysis of Elizabethan poetry were a jumble of brave silks, turquoise, scarlet

and aquamarine. "I think it looks nice. A little crowded, maybe, but that's the pioneer aesthetic."

"It looks like a shopping mall, but that's not what I'm talking about. It's—" He groped for words. "It's like—it's what we're doing to this world that bothers me. I mean, we're digging it up, scattering garbage about, ripping the mountains apart, and for what?"

"Money," Anya said. "Consumer goods, raw materials, a future for our children. What's wrong with that?"

"We're not building a future, we're building weapons."

"There's not so much as a handgun on the Moon. It's an intercorporate development zone. Weapons are illegal here."

"You know what I mean. All those bomber fuselages, detonation systems, and missile casings that get built here, and shipped to low Earth orbit. Let's not pretend we don't know what they're for."

"So?" Anya said sweetly. "We live in the real world, we're none of us naive enough to believe you can have governments without armies. Why is it worse that these things are being built here rather than elsewhere?"

"It's the short-sighted, egocentric greed of what we're doing that gripes me! Have you peeked out on the surface lately and seen the way it's being ripped open, torn apart and scattered about? There are still places where you can gaze upon a harsh beauty unchanged since the days our ancestors were swinging in trees. But we're trashing them. In a generation, two at most, there will be no more beauty to the Moon than there is to any other garbage dump."

"You've seen what Earthbound manufacturing has done to the environment," Anya said. "Moving it off the planet is a good thing, right?"

"Yes, but the Moon—"

"Doesn't even have an ecosphere. There's nothing here to harm."

They glared at each other. Finally Hiro said, "I don't want to talk about it," and sullenly picked up his cards.

Five or six hands later, a woman wandered up and plumped to the grass by Krishna's feet. Her eye shadow was vivid electric purple, and a crazy smile burned on her face. "Oh hi," Krishna said. "Does everyone here know Sally Chang? She's a research component of the Center for Self-Replicating Technologies, like me."

The others nodded. Gunther said, "Gunther Weil. Blue-collar component of Generation Five."

She giggled.

Gunther blinked. "You're certainly in a good mood." He rapped the deck with his knuckles. "I'll stand."

"I'm on psilly," she said.

"One card."

"Psilocybin?" Gunther said. "I might be interested in some of that. Did you grow it or microfacture it? I have a couple of factories back in my room, maybe I could divert one if you'd like to license the software?"

Sally Chang shook her head, laughing helplessly. Tears ran down her cheeks.

"Well, when you come down we can talk about it." Gunther squinted at his cards. "This would make a great hand for chess."

"Nobody plays chess," Hiro said scornfully. "It's a game for computers."

Gunther took the pot with two pair. He shuffled, Krishna declined the cut, and he began dealing out cards. "So anyway, this crazy Russian lady—"

Out of nowhere, Chang howled. Wild gusts of laughter knocked her back on her heels and bent her forward again. The delight of discovery dancing in her eyes, she pointed a finger straight at Gunther. "You're a robot!" she cried.

"Beg pardon?"

"You're nothing but a robot," she repeated. "You're a machine, an automaton. Look at yourself! Nothing but stimulus-response. You have no free will at all. There's nothing there. You couldn't perform an original act to save your life."

"Oh yeah?" Gunther glanced around, looking for inspiration. A little boy—it might be Pyotr Nahfees, though it was hard to tell from here—was by the edge of the water, feeding scraps of shrimp loaf to the carp. "Suppose I pitched you into the lake? That would be an original act."

Laughing, she shook her head. "Typical primate behavior. A perceived threat is met with a display of mock aggression."

Gunther laughed.

"Then, when that fails, the primate falls back to a display of submission. Appeasement. The monkey demonstrates his harmlessness—you see?"

"Hey, this really isn't funny," Gunther said warningly. "In fact, it's kind of insulting."

"And so back to a display of aggression."

Gunther sighed and threw up both his hands. "How am I supposed to react? According to you, anything I say or do is wrong."

"Submission again. Back and forth, back and forth from aggression to submission and back again." She pumped her arm as if it were a piston. "Just like a little machine—you see? It's all automatic behavior."

"Hey, Kreesh—you're the neurobiowhatever here, right? Put in a good word for me. Get me out of this conversation."

Krishna reddened. He would not meet Gunther's eyes. "Ms. Chang is very highly regarded at the Center, you see. Anything she thinks about thinking is worth thinking about." The woman watched him avidly, eyes glistening, pupils small. "I think maybe what she means, though, is that we're all basically cruising through life. Like we're on autopilot. Not just you specifically, but all of us." He appealed to her directly. "Yes?"

"No, no, no, no." She shook her head. "Him specifically."

"I give up." Gunther put his cards down, and lay back on the granite slab so he could stare up through the roof glass at the waning Earth. When he closed his eyes, he could see Izmailova's hopper, rising. It was a skimpy device, little more than a platform-and-chair atop a cluster of four bottles of waste-gas propellant, and a set of smart legs. He saw it lofting up as the explosion blossomed, seeming briefly to hover high over the crater, like a hawk atop a thermal. Hands by side, the red-suited figure sat, watching with what seemed inhuman calm. In the reflected light she burned as bright as a star. In an appalling way, she was beautiful.

Sally Chang hugged her knees, rocking back and forth. She laughed and laughed.

Beth Hamilton was wired for telepresence. She flipped up one lens when Gunther entered her office, but kept on moving her arms and legs. Dreamy little ghost motions that would be picked up and magnified in a factory somewhere over the horizon. "You're late again," she said with no particular emphasis.

Most people would have experienced at least a twinge of reality sickness dealing with two separate surrounds at once. Hamilton was

one of the rare few who could split her awareness between two disparate realities without loss of efficiency in either. "I called you in to discuss your future with Generation Five. Specifically, to discuss the possibility of your transfer to another plant."

"You mean Earthside."

"You see?" Hamilton said. "You're not as stupid as you like to make yourself out to be." She flipped the lens down again, stood very still, then lifted a metal-gauntleted hand and ran through a complex series of finger movements. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"Tokyo, Berlin, Buenos Aires—do any of these hold magic for you? How about Toronto? The right move now could be a big boost to your career."

"All I want is to stay here, do my job, and draw down my salary," Gunther said carefully. "I'm not looking for a shot at promotion, or a big raise, or a lateral career-track transfer. I'm happy right where I am."

"You've sure got a funny way of showing it." Hamilton powered down her gloves, and slipped her hands free. She scratched her nose. To one side stood her work table, a polished cube of black granite. Her peecee rested there, alongside a spray of copper crystals. At her thought, it put Izmailova's voice onto Gunther's chip.

"It is with deepest regret that I must alert you to the unprofessional behavior of one of your personnel components," it began. Listening to the complaint, Gunther experienced a totally unexpected twinge of distress and, more, of resentment that Izmailova had dared judge him so harshly. He was careful not to let it show.

"Irresponsible, insubordinate, careless, and possessed of a bad attitude." He faked a grin. "She doesn't seem to like me much." Hamilton said nothing. "But this isn't enough to ..." His voice trailed off. "Is it?"

"Normally, Weil, it would be. A demo jock isn't 'just a tech on retainer,' as you so quaintly put it; those government licenses aren't easy to get. And you may not be aware of it, but you have very poor efficiency ratings to begin with. Lots of potential, no follow-through. Frankly, you've been a disappointment. However, lucky for you, this Izmailova dame humiliated Don Sakai, and he's let us know that we're under no particular pressure to accommodate her."

"Izmailova humiliated Sakai?"

Hamilton stared at him. "Weil, you're oblivious, you know that?"

Then he remembered Izmailova's rant on nuclear energy. "Right, okay. I got it now."

"So here's your choice. I can write up a reprimand, and it goes into your permanent file, along with Izmailova's complaint. Or you can take a lateral Earthside, and I'll see to it that these little things aren't logged into the corporate system."

It wasn't much of a choice. But he put a good face on it. "In that case it looks like you're stuck with me."

"For the moment, Weil. For the moment."

He was back on the surface the next two days running. The first day he was once again hauling fuel rods to Chatterjee C. This time he kept to the road, and the reactor was refueled exactly on schedule. The second day he went all the way out to Triesnecker to pick up some old rods that had been in temporary storage for six months while the Kerr-McGee people argued over whether they should be reprocessed or dumped. Not a bad deal for him, because although the sunspot cycle was on the wane, there was a surface advisory in effect and he was drawing hazardous duty pay.

When he got there, a tech rep telepresenced in from somewhere in France to tell him to forget it. There'd been another meeting, and the decision had once again been delayed. He started back to Bootstrap with the new a capella version of the *Threepenny Opera* playing in his head. It sounded awfully sweet and reedy for his tastes, but that was what they were listening to up home.

Fifteen kilometers down the road, the UV meter on the dash jumped.

Gunther reached out to tap the meter with his finger. It did not respond. With a freezing sensation at the back of his neck, he glanced up at the roof of the cab and whispered, "Oh, no."

"The Radiation Forecast Facility has just intensified its surface warning to a Most Drastic status," the truck said calmly. "This is due to an unanticipated flare storm, onset immediately. Everyone currently on the surface is to proceed with all haste to shelter. Repeat: Proceed immediately to shelter."

"I'm eighty kilometers from—"

The truck was slowing to a stop. "Because this unit is not hardened, excessive fortuitous radiation may cause it to malfunction. To

ensure the continued safe operation of this vehicle, all controls will be frozen in manual mode and this unit will now shut off."

With the release of the truck's masking functions, Gunther's head filled with overlapping voices. Static washed through them, making nonsense of what they were trying to say:

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****astic Status***epeat: We******his is
Beth. The****hail*** ***yo**** *ere? *C**
Su**ace adv***ry as*******ve jus**issued
****ost***om**on **good**uddy****ve up**
****to Most**rast***rasticad*isory **Get
*off****me a**oot***Miko, Sabra**ic***
Sta**s. All unit* and* *the surfac*****d
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***ng? Find undergrou***right now***
*elter immediately. Maxim*** shelter.
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off****es. Repeat: Maximum exp****far,
it'll fry you. List***f the lights. Who
else***os*re twenty m*nutes. Fi*en, ther*
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"Beth! The nearest shelter is back at Weisskopf—that's half an hour at top speed and I've got an advisory here of twenty minutes. Tell me what to do!"

But the first sleet of hard particles was coming in too hard to make out anything more. A hand, his apparently, floated forward and flicked off the radio relay. The voices in his head died.

The crackling static went on and on. The truck sat motionless, half an hour from nowhere, invisible death sizzling and popping down through the cab roof. He put his helmet and gloves on, double-checked their seals, and unlatched the door.

It slammed open. Pages from the op manual flew away, and a glove went tumbling gaily across the surface, chasing the pink fuzzy-dice that Eurydice had given him that last night in Sweden. A handful of wheat biscuits in an open tin on the dash turned to powder and were gone, drawing the tin after them. Explosive decompression. He'd forgotten to depressurize. Gunther froze in dismayed astonishment at having made so basic—so dangerous—a mistake.

Then he was on the surface, head tilted back, staring up at the sun. It was angry with sunspots, and one enormous and unpredicted solar flare.

I'm going to die, he thought.

For a long, paralyzing instant, he tasted the chill certainty of that thought. He was going to die. He knew that for a fact, knew it more surely than he had ever known anything before.

In his mind, he could see Death sweeping across the lunar plain toward him. Death was a black wall, featureless, that stretched to infinity in every direction. It sliced the universe in half. On this side were life, warmth, craters and flowers, dreams, mining robots, thought, everything that Gunther knew or could imagine. On the other side ... Something? Nothing? The wall gave no hint. It was unreadable, enigmatic, absolute. But it was bearing down on him. It was so close now that he could almost reach out and touch it. Soon it would be here. He would pass through, and then he would know.

With a start he broke free of that thought, and jumped for the cab. He scrabbled up its side. His trance chip hissing, rattling and crackling, he yanked the magnetic straps holding Siegfried in place, grabbed the spool and control pad, and jumped over the edge.

He landed jarringly, fell to his knees, and rolled under the trailer. There was enough shielding wrapped around the fuel rods to stop any amount of hard radiation—no matter what its source. It would shelter

him as well from the sun as from his cargo. The trance chip fell silent, and he felt his jaws relaxing from a clenched tension.

Safe.

It was dark beneath the trailer, and he had time to think. Even kicking his rebreather up to full, and offlining all his suit peripherals, he didn't have enough oxygen to sit out the storm. So okay. He had to get to a shelter. Weisskopf was closest, only fifteen kilometers away and there was a shelter in the G5 assembly plant there. That would be his goal.

Working by feel, he found the steel supporting struts, and used Siegfried's magnetic straps to attach himself to the underside of the trailer. It was clumsy, difficult work, but at last he hung face-down over the road. He fingered the walker's controls, and sat Siegfried up.

Twelve excruciating minutes later, he finally managed to get Siegfried down from the roof unbroken. The interior wasn't intended to hold anything half so big. To get the walker in he had first to cut the door free, and then rip the chair out of the cab. Discarding both items by the roadside, he squeezed Siegfried in. The walker bent over double, reconfigured, reconfigured again, and finally managed to fit itself into the space. Gently, delicately, Siegfried took the controls and shifted into first.

With a bump, the truck started to move.

It was a hellish trip. The truck, never fast to begin with, wallowed down the road like a cast-iron pig. Siegfried's optics were bent over the controls, and couldn't be raised without jerking the walker's hands free. He couldn't look ahead without stopping the truck first.

He navigated by watching the road pass under him. To a crude degree he could align the truck with the treadmarks scrolling by. Whenever he wandered off the track, he worked Siegfried's hand controls to veer the truck back, so that it drifted slowly from side to side, zig-zagging its way down the road.

Shadows bumping and leaping, the road flowed toward Gunther with dangerous monotony. He jiggled and vibrated in his makeshift sling. After a while his neck hurt with the effort of holding his head back to watch the glaring road disappearing into shadow by the front axle, and his eyes ached from the crawling repetitiveness of what they saw.

The truck kicked up dust in passing, and the smaller particles carried enough of a static charge to cling to his suit. At irregular intervals

he swiped at the fine grey film on his visor with his glove, smearing it into long, thin streaks.

He began to hallucinate. They were mild visuals, oblong patches of colored light that moved in his vision and went away when he shook his head and firmly closed his eyes for a concentrated moment. But every moment's release from the pressure of vision tempted him to keep his eyes closed longer, and that he could not afford to do.

It put him in mind of the last time he had seen his mother, and what she had said then. That the worst part of being a widow was that every day her life began anew, no better than the day before, the pain still fresh, her husband's absence a physical fact she was no closer to accepting than ever. It was like being dead, she said, in that nothing ever changed.

Ah God, he thought, this isn't worth doing. Then a rock the size of his head came bounding toward his helmet. Frantic hands jerked at the controls, and Siegfried skewed the truck wildly, so that the rock jumped away and missed him. Which put an end to that line of thought.

He cued his peecee. *Saint James' Infirmary* came on. It didn't help.

Come on, you bastard, he thought. You can do it. His arms and shoulders ached, and his back too, when he gave it any thought. Perversely enough, one of his legs had gone to sleep. At the angle he had to hold his head to watch the road, his mouth tended to hang open. After a while, a quivering motion alerted him that a small puddle of saliva had gathered in the curve of his faceplate. He was drooling. He closed his mouth, swallowing back his spit, and stared forward. A minute later he found that he was doing it again.

Slowly, miserably, he drove toward Weisskopf.

The G5 Weisskopf plant was typical of its kind: A white blister-dome to moderate temperature swings over the long lunar day, a microwave relay tower to bring in supervisory presence, and a hundred semiautonomous units to do the work.

Gunther overshot the access road, wheeled back to catch it, and ran the truck right up to the side of the factory. He had Siegfried switch off the engine, and then let the control pad fall to the ground. For well over a minute he simply hung there, eyes closed, savoring the end of motion. Then he kicked free of the straps, and crawled out from under the trailer.

Static skatting and stuttering inside his head, he stumbled into the factory.

In the muted light that filtered through the dome covering, the factory was dim as an undersea cavern. His helmet light seemed to distort as much as it illumined. Machines loomed closer in the center of its glare, swelling up as if seen through a fisheye lens. He turned it off, and waited for his eyes to adjust.

After a bit, he could see the robot assemblers, slender as ghosts, moving with unearthly delicacy. The flare storm had activated them. They swayed like seaweed, lightly out of sync with each other. Arms raised, they danced in time to random radio input.

On the assembly lines lay the remains of half-built robots, looking flayed and eviscerated. Their careful frettings of copper and silver nerves had been exposed to view and randomly operated upon. A long arm jointed down, electric fire at its tip, and made a metal torso twitch.

They were blind mechanisms, most of them, powerful things bolted to the floor in assembly logic paths. But there were mobile units as well, overseers and jacks-of-all-trades, weaving drunkenly through the factory with sun-maddened eye.

A sudden motion made Gunther turn just in time to see a metal puncher swivel toward him, slam down an enormous arm and put a hole in the floor by his feet. He felt the shock through his soles.

He danced back. The machine followed him, the diamond-tipped punch sliding nervously in and out of its sheath, its movements as trembling and dainty as a newborn colt's.

"Easy there, baby," Gunther whispered. To the far end of the factory, green arrows supergraffixed on the crater wall pointed to an iron door. The shelter. Gunther backed away from the punch, edging into a service aisle between two rows of machines that rippled like grass in the wind.

The punch press rolled forward on its trundle. Then, confused by that field of motion, it stopped, hesitantly scanning the ranks of robots. Gunther froze.

At last, slowly, lumberingly, the metal puncher turned away.

Gunther ran. Static roared in his head. Grey shadows swam among the distant machines, like sharks, sometimes coming closer, sometimes receding. The static loudened. Up and down the factory welding arcs winked on at the assembler tips, like tiny stars. Ducking, running, spin-

ning, he reached the shelter and seized the airlock door. Even through his glove, the handle felt cold.

He turned it.

The airlock was small and round. He squeezed through the door and fit himself into the inadequate space within, making himself as small as possible. He yanked the door shut.

Darkness.

He switched his helmet lamp back on. The reflected glare slammed at his eyes, far too intense for such a confined area. Folded knees-to-chin into the roundness of the lock he felt a wry comradeship with Siegfried back in the truck.

The inner lock controls were simplicity itself. The door hinged inward, so that air pressure held it shut. There was a yank bar which, when pulled, would bleed oxygen into the airlock. When pressure equalized, the inner door would open easily. He yanked the bar.

The floor vibrated as something heavy went by.

The shelter was small, just large enough to hold a cot, a chemical toilet and a rebreather with spare oxytanks. A single overhead unit provided light and heat. For comfort there was a blanket. For amusement, there were pocket-sized editions of the Bible and the Koran, placed there by impossibly distant missionary societies. Even empty, there was not much space in the shelter.

It wasn't empty.

A woman, frowning and holding up a protective hand, cringed from his helmet lamp. "Turn that thing off," she said.

He obeyed. In the soft light that ensued he saw: stark white flattop, pink scalp visible through the sides. High cheekbones. Eyelids lifted slightly, like wings, by carefully sculpted eye shadow. Dark lips, full mouth. He had to admire the character it took to make up a face so carefully, only to hide it beneath a helmet. Then he saw her red and orange Studio Volga suit.

It was Izmailova.

To cover his embarrassment, he took his time removing his gloves and helmet. Izmailova moved her own helmet from the cot to make room, and he sat down beside her. Extending a hand, he stiffly said, "We've met before. My name is—"

"I know. It's written on your suit."

"Oh yeah. Right."

For an uncomfortably long moment, neither spoke. At last Izmailova cleared her throat and briskly said, "This is ridiculous. There's no reason we should—"

CLANG.

Their heads jerked toward the door in unison. The sound was harsh, loud, metallic. Gunther slammed his helmet on, grabbed for his gloves. Izmailova, also suiting up as rapidly as she could, tensely subvocalized into her trance chip: "What is it?"

Methodically snapping his wrist latches shut one by one, Gunther said, "I think it's a metal punch." Then, because the helmet muffled his words, he repeated them over the chip.

CLANG. This second time, they were waiting for the sound. Now there could be no doubt. Something was trying to break open the outer airlock door.

"A what?!"

"Might be a hammer of some type, or a blacksmith unit. Just be thankful it's not a laser jig." He held up his hands before him. "Give me a safety check."

She turned his wrists one way, back, took his helmet in her hands and gave it a twist to test its seal. "You pass." She held up her own wrists. "But what is it trying to do?"

Her gloves were sealed perfectly. One helmet dog had a bit of give in it, but not enough to breach integrity. He shrugged. "It's deranged—it could want anything. It might even be trying to repair a weak hinge."

CLANG.

"It's trying to get in here!"

"That's another possibility, yes."

Izmailova's voice rose slightly. "But even scrambled, there can't possibly be any programs in its memory to make it do that. How can random input make it act this way?"

"It doesn't work like that. You're thinking of the kind of robotics they had when you were a kid. These units are state of the art: They don't manipulate instructions, they manipulate concepts. See, that makes them more flexible. You don't have to program in every little step when you want one to do something new. You just give it a goal—"

CLANG.

"—like, to Disassemble a Rotary Drill. It's got a bank of available skills, like Cutting and Unbolting and Gross Manipulation, which it then fits together in various configurations until it has a path that will bring it to the goal." He was talking for the sake of talking now, talking to keep himself from panic. "Which normally works out fine. But when one of these things malfunctions, it does so on the conceptual level. See? So that—"

"So that it decides we're rotary drills that need to be disassembled."

"Uh … yeah."

CLANG.

"So what do we do when it gets in here?" They had both involuntarily risen to their feet, and stood facing the door. There was not much space, and what little there was they filled. Gunther was acutely aware that there was not enough room here to either fight or flee. "I don't know about you," he said, "but I'm going to hit that sucker over the head with the toilet."

She turned to look at him.

CLA— The noise was cut in half by a breathy, whooshing explosion. Abrupt, total silence. "It's through the outer door," Gunther said flatly.

They waited.

Much later, Izmailova said, "Is it possible it's gone away?"

"I don't know." Gunther undogged his helmet, knelt and put an ear to the floor. The stone was almost painfully cold. "Maybe the explosion damaged it." He could hear the faint vibrations of the assemblers, the heavier rumblings of machines roving the factory floor. None of it sounded close. He silently counted to a hundred. Nothing. He counted to a hundred again.

Finally he straightened. "It's gone."

They both sat down. Izmailova took off her helmet, and Gunther clumsily began undoing his gloves. He fumbled at the latches. "Look at me." He laughed shakily. "I'm all thumbs. I can't even handle this, I'm so unnerved."

"Let me help you with that." Izmailova flipped up the latches, tugged at his glove. It came free. "Where's your other hand?"

Then, somehow, they were each removing the other's suit, tugging at the latches, undoing the seals. They began slowly but sped up with each latch undogged, until they were yanking and pulling with

frantic haste. Gunther opened up the front of Izmailova's suit, revealing a red silk camisole. He slid his hands beneath it, and pushed the cloth up over her breasts. Her nipples were hard. He let her breasts fill his hands and squeezed.

Izmailova made a low, groaning sound in the back of her throat. She had Gunther's suit open. Now she pushed down his leggings and reached within to seize his cock. He was already erect. She tugged it out and impatiently shoved him down on the cot. Then she was kneeling on top of him, and guiding him inside her.

Her mouth met his, warm and moist.

Half in and half out of their suits, they made love. Gunther managed to struggle one arm free, and reached within Izmailova's suit to run a hand up her long back and over the back of her head. The short hairs of her buzz cut stung and tickled his palm.

She rode him roughly, her flesh slippery with sweat against his. "Are you coming yet?" she murmured. "Are you coming yet? Tell me when you're about to come." She bit his shoulder, the side of his neck, his chin, his lower lip. Her nails dug into his flesh.

"Now," he whispered. Possibly he only subvocalized it, and she caught it on her trance chip. But then she clutched him tighter than ever, as if she were trying to crack his ribs, and her whole body shuddered with orgasm. Then he came too, riding her passion down into spiraling desperation, ecstasy and release.

It was better than anything he had ever experienced before.

Afterward, they finally kicked free of their suits. They shoved and pushed the things off the cot. Gunther pulled the blanket out from beneath them, and with Izmailova's help wrapped it about the both of them. They lay together, relaxed, not speaking.

He listened to her breathe for a while. The noise was soft. When she turned her face toward him, he could feel it, a warm little tickle in the hollow of his throat. The smell of her permeated the room. This stranger beside him.

Gunther felt weary, warm, at ease. "How long have you been here?" he asked. "Not here in the shelter, I mean, but …"

"Five days."

"That little." He smiled. "Welcome to the Moon, Ms. Izmailova."

"Ekatarina," she said sleepily. "Call me Ekatarina."

Whooping, they soared high and south, over Herschel. The Ptolemaeus road bent and doubled below them, winding out of sight, always returning. "This is great!" Hiro crowed. "This is— I should've talked you into taking me out here a year ago."

Gunther checked his bearings and throttled down, sinking eastward. The other two hoppers, slaved to his own, followed in tight formation. Two days had passed since the flare storm and Gunther, still on mandatory recoup, had promised to guide his friends into the highlands as soon as the surface advisory was dropped. "We're coming in now. Better triplecheck your safety harnesses. You doing okay back there, Kreesh?"

"I am quite comfortable, yes."

Then they were down on the Seething Bay Company landing pad.

Hiro was the second down and the first on the surface. He bounded about like a collie off its leash, chasing upslope and down, looking for new vantage points. "I can't believe I'm here! I work out this way every day, but you know what? This is the first time I've actually been out here. Physically, I mean."

"Watch your footing," Gunther warned. "This isn't like telepresence—if you break a leg, it'll be up to Krishna and me to carry you out."

"I trust you. Man, anybody who can get caught out in a flare storm, and end up nailing—"

"Hey, watch your language, okay?"

"Everybody's heard the story. I mean, we all thought you were dead, and then they found the two of you asleep. They'll be talking about it a hundred years from now." Hiro was practically choking on his laughter. "You're a legend!"

"Just give it a rest." To change the subject, Gunther said, "I can't believe you want to take a photo of this mess." The Seething Bay operation was a strip mine. Robot bulldozers scooped up the regolith and fed it to a processing plant that rested on enormous skids. They were after the thorium here, and the output was small enough that it could be transported to the breeder reactor by hopper. There was no need for a railgun and the tailings were piled in artificial mountains in the wake of the factory.

"Don't be ridiculous." Hiro swept an arm southward, toward Ptolemaeus. "There!" The crater wall caught the sun, while the lowest parts

of the surrounding land were still in shadow. The gentle slopes seemed to tower; the crater itself was a cathedral, blazing white.

"Where is your camera?" Krishna asked.

"Don't need one. I'll just take the data down on my helmet."

"I'm not too clear on this mosaic project of yours," Gunther said. "Explain to me one more time how it's supposed to work."

"Anya came up with it. She's renting an assembler to cut hexagonal floor tiles in black, white and fourteen intermediate shades of grey. I provide the pictures. We choose the one we like best, scan it in black and white, screen for values of intensity, and then have the assembler lay the floor, one tile per pixel. It'll look great—come by tomorrow and see."

"Yeah, I'll do that."

Chattering like a squirrel, Hiro led them away from the edge of the mine. They bounded westward, across the slope.

Krishna's voice came over Gunther's trance chip. It was an old ground-rat trick. The chips had an effective transmission radius of fifteen yards—you could turn off the radio and talk chip-to-chip, if you were close enough. "You sound troubled, my friend."

He listened for a second carrier tone, heard nothing. Hiro was out of range. "It's Izmailova. I sort of—"

"Fell in love with her."

"How'd you know that?"

They were spaced out across the rising slope, Hiro in the lead. For a time neither spoke. There was a calm, confidential quality to that shared silence, like the anonymous stillness of the confessional. "Please don't take this wrong," Krishna said.

"Take what wrong?"

"Gunther, if you take two sexually compatible people, place them in close proximity, isolate them and scare the hell out of them, they will fall in love. That's a given. It's a survival mechanism, something that was wired into your basic makeup long before you were born. When billions of years of evolution say it's bonding time, your brain doesn't have much choice but to obey."

"Hey, come on over here!" Hiro cried over the radio. "You've got to see this."

"We're coming," Gunther said. Then, over his chip, "You make me out to be one of Sally Chang's machines."

"In some ways we are machines. That's not so bad. We feel thirsty when we need water, adrenalin pumps into the bloodstream when we need an extra boost of aggressive energy. You can't fight your own nature. What would be the point of it?"

"Yeah, but ..."

"Is this great or what?" Hiro was clambering over a boulder field. "It just goes on and on. And look up there!" Upslope, they saw that what they were climbing over was the spillage from a narrow cleft entirely filled with boulders. They were huge, as big as hoppers, some of them large as prefab oxysheds. "Hey, Krishna, I been meaning to ask you—just what is it that you do out there at the Center?"

"I can't talk about it."

"Aw, come on." Hiro lifted a rock the size of his head to his shoulder and shoved it away, like a shot-putter. The rock soared slowly, landed far downslope in a white explosion of dust. "You're among friends here. You can trust us."

Krishna shook his head. Sunlight flashed from the visor. "You don't know what you're asking."

Hiro hoisted a second rock, bigger than the first. Gunther knew him in this mood, nasty-faced and grinning. "My point exactly. The two of us know zip about neurobiology. You could spend the next ten hours lecturing us, and we couldn't catch enough to compromise security." Another burst of dust.

"You don't understand. The Center for Self-Replicating Technologies is here for a reason. The lab work could be done back on Earth for a fraction of what a lunar facility costs. Our sponsors only move projects here that they're genuinely afraid of."

"So what can you tell us about? Just the open stuff, the video magazine stuff. Nothing secret."

"Well ... okay." Now it was Krishna's turn. He picked up a small rock, wound up like a baseball player and threw. It dwindled and disappeared in the distance. A puff of white sprouted from the surface. "You know Sally Chang? She has just finished mapping the neurotransmitter functions."

They waited. When Krishna added nothing further, Hiro dryly said, "Wow."

"Details, Kreesh. Some of us aren't so fast to see the universe in a grain of sand as you are."

"It should be obvious. We've had a complete genetic map of the brain for almost a decade. Now add to that Sally Chang's chemical map, and it's analogous to being given the keys to the library. No, better than that. Imagine that you've spent your entire life within an enormous library filled with books in a language you neither read nor speak, and that you've just found the dictionary and a picture reader."

"So what are you saying? That we'll have complete understanding of how the brain operates?"

"We'll have complete control over how the brain operates. With chemical therapy, it will be possible to make anyone think or feel anything we want. We will have an immediate cure for all non-traumatic mental illness. We'll be able to fine-tune aggression, passion, creativity—bring them up, damp them down, it'll be all the same. You can see why our sponsors are so afraid of what our research might produce."

"Not really, no. The world could use more sanity," Gunther said.

"I agree. But who defines sanity? Many governments consider political dissent grounds for mental incarceration. This would open the doors of the brain, allowing it to be examined from the outside. For the first time, it would be possible to discover unexpressed rebellion. Modes of thought could be outlawed. The potential for abuse is not inconsiderable.

"Consider also the military applications. This knowledge combined with some of the new nanoweaponry might produce a berserker gas, allowing you to turn the enemy's armies upon their own populace. Or, easier, to throw them into a psychotic frenzy and let them turn on themselves. Cities could be pacified by rendering the citizenry catatonic. A secondary, internal reality could then be created, allowing the conqueror to use the masses as slave labor. The possibilities are endless."

They digested this in silence. At last Hiro said, "Jeeze, Krishna, if that's the open goods, what the hell kind of stuff do you have to hide?"

"I can't tell you."

A minute later, Hiro was haring off again. At the foot of a nearby hill he found an immense boulder standing atilt on its small end. He danced about, trying to get good shots past it without catching his own footprints in them.

"So what's the problem?" Krishna said over his chip.

"The problem is, I can't arrange to see her. Ekatarina. I've left messages, but she won't answer them. And you know how it is in Bootstrap—it takes a real effort to avoid somebody who wants to see you. But she's managed it."

Krishna said nothing.

"All I want to know is, just what's going on here?"

"She's avoiding you."

"But why? I fell in love and she didn't, is that what you're telling me? I mean, is that a crock or what?"

"Without hearing her side of the story, I can't really say how she feels. But the odds are excellent she fell every bit as hard as you did. The difference is that you think it's a good idea, and she doesn't. So of course she's avoiding you. Contact would just make it more difficult for her to master her feelings for you."

"Shit!"

An unexpected touch of wryness entered Krishna's voice. "What do you want? A minute ago you were complaining that Sally Chang thinks you're a machine. Now you're unhappy that Izmailova thinks she's not."

"Hey, you guys! Come over here. I've found the perfect shot. You've got to see this."

They turned to see Hiro waving at them from the hilltop. "I thought you were leaving," Gunther grumbled. "You said you were sick of the Moon, and going away and never coming back. So how come you're upgrading your digs all of a sudden?"

"That was yesterday! Today, I'm a pioneer, a builder of worlds, a founder of dynasties!"

"This is getting tedious. What does it take to get a straight answer out of you?"

Hiro bounded high and struck a pose, arms wide and a little ridiculous. He staggered a bit on landing. "Anya and I are getting married!"

Gunther and Krishna looked at each other, blank visor to blank visor. Forcing enthusiasm into his voice, Gunther said, "Hey, no shit? Really! Congratu—"

A scream of static howled up from nowhere. Gunther winced and cut down the gain. "My stupid radio is—"

One of the other two—they had moved together and he couldn't tell them apart at this distance—was pointing upward. Gunther tilted back his head, to look at the Earth. For a second he wasn't sure what he was looking for. Then he saw it: a diamond pinprick of light in the middle of the night. It was like a small, bright hole in reality, somewhere in continental Asia. "What the hell is that?" he asked.

Softly, Hiro said, "I think it's Vladivostok."

By the time they were back over the Sinus Medii, that first light had reddened and faded away, and two more had blossomed. The news jockey at the Observatory was working overtime splicing together reports from the major news feeds into a montage of rumor and fear. The radio was full of talk about hits on Seoul and Buenos Aires. Those seemed certain. Strikes against Panama, Iraq, Denver and Cairo were disputed. A stealth missile had flown low over Hokkaido and been deflected into the Sea of Japan. The Swiss Orbitals had lost some factories to fragmentation satellites. There was no agreement as to the source aggressor, and though most suspicions trended in one direction, Tokyo denied everything.

Gunther was most impressed by the sound feed from a British video essayist, who said that it did not matter who had fired the first shot, or why. "Who shall we blame? The Southern Alliance, Tokyo, General Kim, or possibly some Grey terrorist group that nobody has ever heard of before? In a world whose weapons were wired to hair triggers, the question is irrelevant. When the first device exploded, it activated autonomous programs which launched what is officially labeled 'a measured response.' Gorshov himself could not have prevented it. His tactical programs chose this week's three most likely aggressors—at least two of which were certainly innocent—and launched a response. Human beings had no say over it.

"Those three nations in turn had their own reflexive 'measured responses.' The results of which we are just beginning to learn. Now we will pause for five days, while all concerned parties negotiate. How do we know this? Abstracts of all major defense programs are available on any public data net. They are no secret. Openness is in fact what deterrence is all about.

"We have five days to avert a war that literally nobody wants. The question is, in five days can the military and political powers seize control

of their own defense programming? Will they? Given the pain and anger involved, the traditional hatreds, national chauvinism, and the natural reactions of those who number loved ones among the already dead, can those in charge overcome their own natures in time to pull back from final and total war? Our best informed guess is no. No, they cannot.

"Good night, and may God have mercy on us all."

They flew northward in silence. Even when the broadcast cut off in mid-word, nobody spoke. It was the end of the world, and there was nothing they could say that did not shrink to insignificance before that fact. They simply headed home.

The land about Bootstrap was dotted with graffiti, great block letters traced out in boulders: KARL OPS - EINDHOVEN '49 and LOUISE MCTIGHE ALBUQUERQUE N.M. An enormous eye in a pyramid. ARSENAL WORLD RUGBY CHAMPS with a crown over it. CORNPONE. Pi Lambda Phi. MOTORHEADS. A giant with a club. Coming down over them, Gunther reflected that they all referred to places and things in the world overhead, not a one of them indigenous to the Moon. What had always seemed pointless now struck him as unspeakably sad.

It was only a short walk from the hopper pad to the vacuum garage. They didn't bother to summon a jitney.

The garage seemed strangely unfamiliar to Gunther now, though he had passed through it a thousand times. It seemed to float in its own mystery, as if everything had been removed and replaced by its exact double, rendering it different and somehow unknowable. Row upon row of parked vehicles were slanted by type within painted lines. Ceiling lights strained to reach the floor, and could not.

"Boy, is this place still!" Hiro's voice seemed unnaturally loud.

It was true. In all the cavernous reaches of the garage, not a single remote or robot service unit stirred. Not so much as a pressure leak sniffer moved.

"Must be because of the news," Gunther muttered. He found he was not ready to speak of the war directly. To the back of the garage, five airlocks stood all in a row. Above them a warm, yellow strip of window shone in the rock. In the room beyond, he could see the overseer moving about.

Hiro waved an arm, and the small figure within leaned forward to wave back. They trudged to the nearest lock and waited.

Nothing happened.

After a few minutes, they stepped back and away from the lock to peer up through the window. The overseer was still there, moving unhurriedly. "Hey!" Hiro shouted over open frequency. "You up there! Are you on the job?"

The man smiled, nodded and waved again.

"Then open the goddamned door!" Hiro strode forward, and with a final, nodding wave, the overseer bent over his controls.

"Uh, Hiro," Gunther said, "There's something odd about ..."

The door exploded open.

It slammed open so hard and fast the door was half torn off its hinges. The air within blasted out like a charge from a cannon. For a moment the garage was filled with loose tools, parts of vacuum suits and shreds of cloth. A wrench struck Gunther a glancing blow on his arm, spinning him around and knocking him to the floor.

He stared up in shock. Bits and pieces of things hung suspended for a long, surreal instant. Then, the air fled, they began to slowly shower down. He got up awkwardly, massaging his arm through the suit. "Hiro, are you all right? Kreesh?"

"Oh my God," Krishna said.

Gunther spun around. He saw Krishna crouched in the shadow of a flatbed, over something that could not possibly be Hiro, because it bent the wrong way. He walked through shimmering unreality and knelt beside Krishna. He stared down at Hiro's corpse.

Hiro had been standing directly before the door when the overseer opened the door without depressurizing the corridor within first. He had caught the blast straight on. It had lifted him and smashed him against the side of a flatbed, snapping his spine and shattering his helmet visor with the backlash. He must have died instantaneously.

"Who's there?" a woman said.

A jitney had entered the garage without Gunther's noticing it. He looked up in time to see a second enter, and then a third. People began piling out. Soon there were some twenty individuals advancing across the garage. They broke into two groups. One headed straight toward the locks and the smaller group advanced on Gunther and his friends. It looked for all the world like a military operation. "Who's there?" the woman repeated.

Gunther lifted his friend's corpse in his arms and stood. "It's Hiro," he said flatly. "Hiro."

They floated forward cautiously, a semicircle of blank-visored suits like so many kachinas. He could make out the corporate logos. Mitsubishi. Westinghouse. Holst Orbital. Izmailova's red-and-orange suit was among them, and a vivid Mondrian pattern he didn't recognize. The woman spoke again, tensely, warily. "Tell me how you're feeling, Hiro."

It was Beth Hamilton.

"That's not Hiro," Krishna said. "It's Gunther. That's Hiro. That he's carrying. We were out in the highlands and—" His voice cracked and collapsed in confusion.

"Is that you, Krishna?" someone asked. "There's a touch of luck. Send him up front, we're going to need him when we get in." Somebody else slapped an arm over Krishna's shoulders and led him away.

Over the radio, a clear voice spoke to the overseer. "Dmitri, is that you? It's Signe. You remember me, don't you, Dmitri? Signe Ohmstede. I'm your friend."

"Sure I remember you, Signe. I remember you. How could I ever forget my friend? Sure I do."

"Oh, good. I'm so happy. Listen carefully, Dmitri. Everything's fine."

Indignantly, Gunther chinned his radio to send. "The hell it is! That fool up there—!"

A burly man in a Westinghouse suit grabbed Gunther's bad arm and shook him. "Shut the fuck up!" he growled. "This is serious, damn you. We don't have the time to baby you."

Hamilton shoved between them. "For God's sake, Posner, he's just seen—" She stopped. "Let me take care of him. I'll get him calmed down. Just give us half an hour, okay?"

The others traded glances, nodded, and turned away.

To Gunther's surprise, Ekatarina spoke over his trance chip. "I'm sorry, Gunther," she murmured. Then she was gone.

He was still holding Hiro's corpse. He found himself staring down at his friend's ruined face. The flesh was bruised and as puffy-looking as an overboiled hot dog. He couldn't look away.

"Come on." Beth gave him a little shove to get him going. "Put the body in the back of that pick-up and give us a drive out to the cliff."

At Hamilton's insistence, Gunther drove. He found it helped, having something to do. Hands afloat on the steering wheel, he stared ahead looking for the Mausoleum road cut-off. His eyes felt scratchy, and inhumanly dry.

"There was a preemptive strike against us," Hamilton said. "Sabotage. We're just now starting to put the pieces together. Nobody knew you were out on the surface or we would've sent somebody out to meet you. It's all been something of a shambles here."

He drove on in silence, cushioned and protected by all those miles of hard vacuum wrapped about him. He could feel the presence of Hiro's corpse in the back of the truck, a constant psychic itch between his shoulder blades. But so long as he didn't speak, he was safe; he could hold himself aloof from the universe that held the pain. It couldn't touch him. He waited, but Beth didn't add anything to what she'd already said.

Finally he said, "Sabotage?"

"A software meltdown at the radio station. Explosions at all the railguns. Three guys from Microspacecraft Applications bought it when the Boitsovij Kot railgun blew. I suppose it was inevitable. All the military industry up here, it's not surprising somebody would want to knock us out of the equation. But that's not all. Something's happened to the people in Bootstrap. Something really horrible. I was out at the Observatory when it happened. The newsjay called back to see if there was any backup software to get the station going again, and she got nothing but gibberish. Crazy stuff. I mean, really crazy. We had to disconnect the Observatory's remotes, because the operators were ..." She was crying now, softly and insistently, and it was a minute before she could speak again. "Some sort of biological weapon. That's all we know."

"We're here."

As he pulled up to the foot of the Mausoleum cliff, it occurred to Gunther that they hadn't thought to bring a drilling rig. Then he counted ten black niches in the rockface, and realized that somebody had been thinking ahead.

"The only people who weren't hit were those who were working at the Center or the Observatory, or out on the surface. Maybe a hundred of us all told."

They walked around to the back of the pick-up. Gunther waited, but Hamilton didn't offer to carry the body. For some reason that made

him feel angry and resentful. He unlatched the gate, hopped up on the treads, and hoisted the suited corpse. "Let's get this over with."

Before today, only six people had ever died on the Moon. They walked past the caves in which their bodies awaited eternity. Gunther knew their names by heart: Heisse, Yasuda, Spehalski, Dubinin, Mikami, Castillo. And now Hiro. It seemed incomprehensible that the day should ever come when there would be too many dead to know them all by name.

Daisies and tiger lilies had been scattered before the vaults in such profusion that he couldn't help crushing some underfoot.

They entered the first empty niche, and he laid Hiro down upon a stone table cut into the rock. In the halo of his helmet lamp the body looked piteously twisted and uncomfortable. Gunther found that he was crying, large hot tears that crawled down his face and got into his mouth when he inhaled. He cut off the radio until he had managed to blink the tears away. "Shit." He wiped a hand across his helmet. "I suppose we ought to say something."

Hamilton took his hand and squeezed.

"I've never seen him as happy as he was today. He was going to get married. He was jumping around, laughing and talking about raising a family. And now he's dead, and I don't even know what his religion was." A thought occurred to him, and he turned helplessly toward Hamilton. "What are we going to tell Anya?"

"She's got problems of her own. Come on, say a prayer and let's go. You'll run out of oxygen."

"Yeah, okay." He bowed his head. "*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . . .*"

Back at Bootstrap, the surface party had seized the airlocks and led the overseer away from the controls. The man from Westinghouse, Posner, looked down on them from the observation window. "Don't crack your suits," he warned. "Keep them sealed tight at all times. Whatever hit the bastards here is still around. Might be in the water, might be in the air. One whiff and you're out of here! You got that?"

"Yeah, yeah," Gunther grumbled. "Keep your shirt on."

Posner's hand froze on the controls. "Let's get serious here. I'm not letting you in until you acknowledge the gravity of the situation. This isn't a picnic outing. If you're not prepared to help, we don't need you. Is that understood?"

"We understand completely, and we'll cooperate to the fullest," Hamilton said quickly. "Won't we, Weil?"

He nodded miserably.

Only the one lock had been breached, and there were five more sets of pressurized doors between it and the bulk of Bootstrap's air. The city's designers had been cautious.

Overseen by Posner, they passed through the corridors, locks and changing rooms and up the cargo escalators. Finally they emerged into the city interior.

They stood blinking on the lip of Hell.

At first, it was impossible to pinpoint any source for the pervasive sense of wrongness nattering at the edge of consciousness. The parks were dotted with people, the fill lights at the juncture of crater walls and canopy were bright, and the waterfalls still fell gracefully from terrace to terrace. Button quail bobbed comically in the grass.

Then small details intruded. A man staggered about the fourth level, head jerking, arms waving stiffly. A plump woman waddled by, pulling an empty cart made from a wheeled microfactory stand, quacking like a duck. Someone sat in the kneehigh forest by Noguchi Park, tearing out the trees one by one.

But it was the still figures that were on examination more profoundly disturbing. Here a man lay half in and half out of a tunnel entrance, as unselfconscious as a dog. There, three women stood in extreme postures of lassitude, bordering on despair. Everywhere, people did not touch or speak or show in any way that they were aware of one other. They shared an absolute and universal isolation.

"What shall we—" Something slammed onto Gunther's back. He was knocked forward, off his feet. Tumbling, he became aware that fists were striking him, again and again, and then that a lean man was kneeling atop his chest, hysterically shouting, "Don't do it! Don't do it!"

Hamilton seized the man's shoulders, and pulled him away. Gunther got to his knees. He looked into the face of madness: eyes round and fearful, expression full of panic. The man was terrified of Gunther.

With an abrupt wrench, the man broke free. He ran as if pursued by demons. Hamilton stared after him. "You okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, sure." Gunther adjusted his tool harness. "Let's see if we can find the others."

They walked toward the lake, staring about at the self-absorbed figures scattered about the grass. Nobody attempted to speak to them. A woman ran by, barefooted. Her arms were filled with flowers. "Hey!" Hamilton called after her. She smiled fleetingly over her shoulder, but did not slow. Gunther knew her vaguely, an executive supervisor for Martin Marietta.

"Is everybody here crazy?" he asked.

"Sure looks that way."

The woman had reached the shore and was flinging the blossoms into the water with great sweeps of her arm. They littered the surface.

"Damned waste." Gunther had come to Bootstrap before the flowers; he knew the effort involved getting permission to plant them and rewriting the city's ecologics. A man in a blue-striped Krupp suit was running along the verge of the lake.

The woman, flowers gone, threw herself into the water.

At first it appeared she'd suddenly decided to take a dip. But from the struggling, floundering way she thrashed deeper into the water it was clear that she could not swim.

In the time it took Gunther to realize this, Hamilton had leaped forward, running for the lake. Belatedly, he started after her. But the man in the Krupp suit was ahead of them both. He splashed in after the woman. An outstretched hand seized her shoulder and then he fell, pulling her under. She was red-faced and choking when he emerged again, arm across her chest.

By then Gunther and Beth were wading into the lake, and together they three got the woman to shore. When she was released, the woman calmly turned and walked away, as if nothing had happened.

"Gone for more flowers," the Krupp component explained. "This is the third time fair Ophelia there's tried to drown herself. She's not the only one. I've been hanging around, hauling 'em out when they stumble in."

"Do you know where everybody else is? Is there anyone in charge? Somebody giving out orders?"

"Do you need any help?" Gunther asked.

The Krupp man shrugged. "I'm fine. No idea where the others are, though. My friends were going on to the second level when I decided I ought to stay here. If you see them, you might tell 'em I'd appreciate hearing back from them. Three guys in Krupp suits."

"We'll do that," Gunther said.

Hamilton was already walking away.

On a step just beneath the top of the stairs sprawled one of Gunther's fellow G5 components. "Sidney," he said carefully. "How's it going?"

Sidney giggled. "I'm making the effort, if that's what you mean. I don't see that the 'how' of it makes much difference."

"Okay."

"A better way of phrasing that might be to ask why I'm not at work." He stood, and in a very natural manner accompanied Gunther up the steps. "Obviously I can't be two places at once. You wouldn't want to perform major surgery in your own absence, would you?" He giggled again. "It's an oxymoron. Like horses: Those classically beautiful Praxitelesian bodies excreting these long surreal turds."

"Okay."

"I've always admired them for squeezing so much art into a single image."

"Sidney," Hamilton said. "We're looking for our friends. Three people in blue-striped work suits."

"I've seen them. I know just where they went." His eyes were cool and vacant; they didn't seem to focus on anything in particular.

"Can you lead us to them?"

"Even a flower recognizes its own face." A gracefully winding gravel path led through private garden plots and croquet malls. They followed him down it.

There were not many people on the second terrace; with the fall of madness, most seemed to have retreated into the caves. Those few who remained either ignored or cringed away from them. Gunther found himself staring obsessively into their faces, trying to analyze the deficiency he felt in each. Fear nested in their eyes, and the appalled awareness that some terrible thing had happened to them coupled with a complete ignorance of its nature.

"God, these people!"

Hamilton grunted.

He felt he was walking through a dream. Sounds were muted by his suit, and colors less intense seen through his helmet visor. It was as if he had been subtly removed from the world, there and not-there simultaneously, an impression that strengthened with each

new face that looked straight through him with mad, unseeing indifference.

Sidney turned a corner, broke into a trot and jogged into a tunnel entrance. Gunther ran after him. At the mouth of the tunnel, he paused to let his helmet adjust to the new light levels. When it cleared he saw Sidney dart down a side passage. He followed.

At the intersection of passages, he looked and saw no trace of their guide. Sidney had disappeared. "Did you see which way he went?" he asked Hamilton over the radio. There was no answer. "Beth?"

He started down the corridor, halted, and turned back. These things went deep. He could wander around in them forever. He went back out to the terraces. Hamilton was nowhere to be seen.

For lack of any better plan, he followed the path. Just beyond an ornamental holly bush he was pulled up short by a vision straight out of William Blake.

The man had discarded shirt and sandals, and wore only a pair of shorts. He squatted atop a boulder, alert, patient, eating a tomato. A steel pipe slanted across his knees like a staff or scepter, and he had woven a crown of sorts from platinum wire with a fortune's worth of hyperconductor chips dangling over his forehead. He looked every inch a kingly animal.

He stared at Gunther, calm and unblinking.

Gunther shivered. The man seemed less human than anthropoid, crafty in its way, but unthinking. He felt as if he were staring across the eons at Grandfather Ape, crouched on the edge of awareness. An involuntary thrill of superstitious awe seized him. Was this what happened when the higher mental functions were scraped away? Did Archetype lie just beneath the skin, waiting for the opportunity to emerge?

"I'm looking for my friend," he said. "A woman in a G5 suit like mine? Have you seen her? She was looking for three—" He stopped. The man was staring at him blankly. "Oh, never mind."

He turned away and walked on.

After a time, he lost all sense of continuity. Existence fragmented into unconnected images: A man bent almost double, leering and squeezing a yellow rubber duckie. A woman leaping up like a jack-in-the-box from behind an air monitor, shrieking and flapping her arms. An old friend sprawled on the ground, crying, with a broken leg. When he tried to help her, she scrabbled away from him in fear. He couldn't

get near to her without doing more harm. "Stay here," he said, "I'll find help." Five minutes later he realized that he was lost, with no slightest notion of how to find his way back to her again. He came to the stairs leading back down to the bottom level. There was no reason to go down them. There was no reason not to. He went down.

He had just reached the bottom of the stairs when someone in a lavender boutique suit hurried by.

Gunther chinned on his helmet radio.

"Hello!" The lavender suit glanced back at him, its visor a plate of obsidian, but did not turn back. "Do you know where everyone's gone? I'm totally lost. How can I find out what I should be doing?" The lavender suit ducked into a tunnel.

Faintly, a voice answered, "Try the city manager's office."

The city manager's office was a tight little cubby an eighth of a kilometer deep within the tangled maze of administrative and service tunnels. It had never been very important in the scheme of things. The city manager's prime duties were keeping the air and water replenished and scheduling airlock inspections, functions any computer could handle better than a man, had they dared trust them to a machine. The room had probably never been as crowded as it was now. Dozens of people suited for full vacuum spilled out into the hall, anxiously listening to Ekatarina confer with the city's Crisis Management Program. Gunther pushed in as close as he could; even so, he could barely see her.

"—the locks, the farms and utilities, and we've locked away all the remotes. What comes next?"

Ekatarina's peecee hung from her work harness, amplifying the CMP's silent voice. "Now that elementary control has been established, second priority must go to the industrial sector. The factories must be locked down. The reactors must be put to sleep. There is not sufficient human supervisory presence to keep them running. The factories have mothballing programs available upon request.

"Third, the farms cannot tolerate neglect. Fifteen minutes without oxygen, and all the tilapia will die. The calamari are even more delicate. Three experienced agricultural components must be assigned immediately. Double that number, if you only have inexperienced components. Advisory software is available. What are your resources?"

"Let me get back to you on that. What else?"

"What about the people?" a man asked belligerently. "What the hell are you worrying about factories for, when our people are in the state they're in?"

Izmailova looked up sharply. "You're one of Chang's research components, aren't you? Why are you here? Isn't there enough for you to do?" She looked about, as if abruptly awakened from sleep. "All of you! What are you waiting for?"

"You can't put us off that easily! Who made you the little brass-plated general? We don't have to take orders from you."

The bystanders shuffled uncomfortably, not leaving, waiting to take their cue from each other. Their suits were as good as identical in this crush, their helmets blank and expressionless. They looked like so many ambulatory eggs.

The crowd's mood balanced on the instant, ready to fall into acceptance or anger with a featherweight's push. Gunther raised an arm. "General!" he said loudly. "Private Weil here! I'm awaiting my orders. Tell me what to do."

Laughter rippled through the room, and the tension eased. Ekatarina said, "Take whoever's nearest you, and start clearing the afflicted out of the administrative areas. Guide them out toward the open, where they won't be so likely to hurt themselves. Whenever you get a room or corridor emptied, lock it up tight. Got that?"

"Yes, ma'am." He tapped the suit nearest him, and its helmet dipped in a curt nod. But when they turned to leave, their way was blocked by the crush of bodies.

"You!" Ekatarina jabbed a finger. "Go to the farmlocks and foam them shut; I don't want any chance of getting them contaminated. Anyone with experience running factories—that's most of us, I think—should find a remote and get to work shutting the things down. The CMP will help direct you. If you have nothing else to do, buddy up and work at clearing out the corridors. I'll call a general meeting when we've put together a more comprehensive plan of action." She paused. "What have I left out?"

Surprisingly, the CMP answered her: "There are twenty-three children in the city, two of them seven-year-old pre-legals and the rest five years of age or younger, offspring of registered-permanent lunar components. Standing directives are that children be given special care and protection. The third-level chapel can be converted to a care cen-

ter. Word should be spread that as they are found, the children are to be brought there. Assign one reliable individual to oversee them."

"My God, yes." She turned to the belligerent man from the Center, and snapped, "Do it."

He hesitated, then saluted ironically and turned to go.

That broke the logjam. The crowd began to disperse. Gunther and his co-worker—it turned out to be Liza Nagenda, another groundrat like himself—set to work.

In after years Gunther was to remember this period as a time when his life entered a dark tunnel. For long, nightmarish hours he and Liza shuffled from office to storage room, struggling to move the afflicted out of the corporate areas and into the light.

The afflicted did not cooperate.

The first few rooms they entered were empty. In the fourth, a distraught-looking woman was furiously going through drawers and files and flinging their contents away. Trash covered the floor. "It's in here somewhere, it's in here somewhere," she said frantically.

"What's in there, darling?" Gunther said soothingly. He had to speak loudly so he could be heard through his helmet. "What are you looking for?"

She tilted her head up with a smile of impish delight. Using both hands, she smoothed back her hair, elbows high, pushing it straight over her skull, then tucking in stray strands behind her ears. "It doesn't matter, because I'm sure to find it now. Two scarabs appear, and between them the blazing disk of the sun, that's a good omen, not to mention being an analogy for sex. I've had sex, all the sex anyone could want, buggered behind the outhouse by the lizard king when I was nine. What did I care? I had wings then and thought that I could fly."

Gunther edged a little closer. "You're not making any sense at all."

"You know, Tolstoy said there was a green stick in the woods behind his house that once found would cause all men to love one another. I believe in that green stick as a basic principle of physical existence. The universe exists in a matrix of four dimensions which we can perceive and seven which we cannot, which is why we experience peace and brotherhood as a seven-dimensional greenstick phenomenon."

"You've got to listen to me."

"Why? You gonna tell me Hitler is dead? I don't believe in that kind of crap."

"Oh hell," Nagenda said. "You can't reason with a flick. Just grab her arms and we'll chuck her out."

It wasn't that easy, though. The woman was afraid of them. Whenever they approached her, she slipped fearfully away.

If they moved slowly, they could not corner her, and when they both rushed her, she leaped up over a desk and then down into the kneehole. Nagenda grabbed her legs and pulled. The woman wailed, and clutched at the knees of her suit. "Get offa me," Liza snarled. "Gunther, get this crazy woman off my damn legs."

"Don't kill me!" the woman screamed. "I've always voted twice—you know I did. I told them you were a gangster, but I was wrong. Don't take the oxygen out of my lungs!"

They got the woman out of the office, then lost her again when Gunther turned to lock the door. She went fluttering down the corridor with Nagenda in hot pursuit. Then she dove into another office, and they had to start all over again.

It took over an hour to drive the woman from the corridors and release her into the park. The next three went quickly enough by contrast. The one after that was difficult again, and the fifth turned out to be the first woman they had encountered, wandered back to look for her office. When they'd brought her to the open again, Liza Nagenda said, "That's four flicks down and three thousand, eight hundred fifty-eight to go."

"Look—" Gunther began. And then Krishna's voice sounded over his trance chip, stiffly and with exaggerated clarity. "Everyone is to go to the central lake immediately for an organizational meeting. Repeat: Go to the lake immediately. Go to the lake now." He was obviously speaking over a jury-rigged transmitter. The sound was bad and his voice boomed and popped on the chip.

"Alright, okay, I got that," Liza said. "You can shut up now."

"Please go to the lake immediately. Everyone is to go directly to the central—"

"Sheesh."

By the time they got out to the parklands again, the open areas were thick with people. Not just the suited figures of the survivors, either. All the afflicted were emerging from the caves and corridors of

Bootstrap. They walked blindly, uncertainly, toward the lake, as if newly called from the grave. The ground level was filling with people.

"Sonofabitch," Gunther said wonderingly.

"Gunther?" Nagenda asked. "What's going on?"

"It's the trance chips! Sonofabitch, all we had to do was speak to them over the chips. They'll do whatever the voice in their heads tells them to do."

The land about the lake was so crowded that Gunther had trouble spotting any other suits.

Then he saw a suited figure standing on the edge of the second level waving broadly. He waved back and headed for the stairs.

By the time he got to level two, a solid group of the unafflicted had gathered. More and more came up, drawn by the concentration of suits. Finally Ekatarina spoke over the open channel of her suit radio.

"There's no reason to wait for us all to gather. I think everyone is close enough to hear me. Sit down, take a little rest, you've all earned it." People eased down on the grass. Some sprawled on their backs or stomachs, fully suited. Most just sat.

"By a fortunate accident, we've discovered a means of controlling our afflicted friends." There was light applause. "But there are still many problems before us, and they won't all be solved so easily. We've all seen the obvious. Now I must tell you of worse. If the war on Earth goes full thermonuclear, we will be completely and totally cut off, possibly for decades."

A murmur passed through the crowd.

"What does this mean? Beyond the immediate inconveniences—no luxuries, no more silk shirts, no new seed stock, no new videos, no way home for those of us who hadn't already decided to stay—we will be losing much that we require for survival. All our microfacturing capability comes from the Swiss Orbitals. Our water reserves are sufficient for a year, but we lose minute quantities of water vapor to rust and corrosion and to the vacuum every time somebody goes in or out an airlock, and those quantities are necessary for our existence.

"But we can survive. We can process raw hydrogen and oxygen from the regolith, and burn them to produce water. We already make our own air. We can do without most nanoelectronics. We can thrive and prosper and grow, even if Earth … even if the worst happens. But to do so we'll need our full manufacturing capability, and full supervi-

sory capability as well. We must not only restore our factories, but find a way to restore our people. There'll be work and more for all of us in the days ahead."

Nagenda touched helmets with Gunther and muttered, "What a crock."

"Come on, I want to hear this."

"Fortunately, the Crisis Management Program has contingency plans for exactly this situation. According to its records, which may be incomplete, I have more military command experience than any other functional. Does anyone wish to challenge this?" She waited, but nobody said anything. "We will go to a quasimilitary structure for the duration of the emergency. This is strictly for organizational purposes. There will be no privileges afforded the officers, and the military structure will be dismantled immediately upon resolution of our present problems. That's paramount."

She glanced down at her peecee. "To that purpose, I am establishing beneath me a triumvirate of subordinate officers, consisting of Carlos Diaz-Rodrigues, Miiko Ezumi, and Will Posner. Beneath them will be nine officers, each responsible for a cadre of no more than ten individuals."

She read out names. Gunther was assigned to Cadre Four, Beth Hamilton's group. Then Ekatarina said, "We're all tired. The gang back at the Center have rigged up a decontamination procedure, a kitchen and sleeping spaces of sorts. Cadres One, Two and Three will put in four more hours here, then pull down a full eight hours sleep. Cadres Four through Nine may return now to the Center for a meal and four hours rest." She stopped. "That's it. Go get some shut-eye."

A ragged cheer arose, fell flat and died. Gunther stood. Liza Nagenda gave him a friendly squeeze on the butt and when he started to the right yanked his arm and pointed him left, toward the service escalators. With easy familiarity, she slid an arm around his waist.

He'd known guys who'd slept with Liza Nagenda, and they all agreed that she was bad news, possessive, hysterical, ludicrously emotional. But what the hell. It was easier than not.

They trudged off.

There was too much to do. They worked to exhaustion—it was not enough. They rigged a system of narrow-band radio transmissions for

the CMP and ran a microwave patch back to the Center, so it could direct their efforts more efficiently—it was not enough. They organized and rearranged constantly. But the load was too great and accidents inevitably happened.

Half the surviving railguns—small units used to deliver raw and semiprocessed materials over the highlands and across the bay—were badly damaged when the noonday sun buckled their aluminum rails; the sunscreens had not been put in place in time. An unknown number of robot bulldozers had wandered off from the strip mines and were presumably lost. It was hard to guess how many because the inventory records were scrambled. None of the food stored in Bootstrap could be trusted; the Center's meals had to be harvested direct from the farms and taken out through the emergency locks. An inexperienced farmer mishandled her remote, and ten aquaculture tanks boiled out into vacuum, geysering nine thousand fingerlings across the surface. On Pos-ner's orders, the remote handler rigs were hastily packed and moved to the Center. When uncrated, most were found to have damaged rocker arms.

There were small victories. On his second shift, Gunther found fourteen bales of cotton in vacuum storage and set an assembler to sewing futons for the Center. That meant an end to sleeping on bare floors and made him a local hero for the rest of that day. There were not enough toilets in the Center; Diaz-Rodrigues ordered the flare storm shelters in the factories stripped of theirs. Huriel Garza discovered a talent for cooking with limited resources.

But they were losing ground. The afflicted were unpredictable, and they were everywhere. A demented systems analyst, obeying the voices in his head, dumped several barrels of lubricating oil in the lake. The water filters clogged, and the streams had to be shut down for repairs. A doctor somehow managed to strangle herself with her own diagnostic harness. The city's ecologics were badly stressed by random vandalism.

Finally somebody thought to rig up a voice loop for continuous transmission. "I am calm," it said. "I am tranquil. I do not want to do anything. I am happy where I am."

Gunther was working with Liza Nagenda trying to get the streams going again when the loop came on. He looked up and saw an uncanny quiet spread over Bootstrap. Up and down the terraces, the flicks stood in postures of complete and utter impassivity. The only move-

ment came from the small number of suits scurrying like beetles among the newly catatonic.

Liza put her hands on her hips. "Terrific. Now we've got to *feed* them."

"Hey, cut me some slack, okay? This is the first good news I've heard since I don't know when."

"It's not good anything, sweetbuns. It's just more of the same."

She was right. Relieved as he was, Gunther knew it. One hopeless task had been traded for another.

He was wearily suiting up for his third day when Hamilton stopped him and said, "Weil! You know any electrical engineering?"

"Not really, no. I mean, I can do the wiring for a truck, or maybe rig up a microwave relay, stuff like that, but ..."

"It'll have to do. Drop what you're on, and help Krishna set up a system for controlling the flicks. Some way we can handle them individually."

They set up shop in Krishna's old lab. The remnants of old security standards still lingered, and nobody had been allowed to sleep there. Consequently, the room was wonderfully neat and clean, all crafted-in-orbit laboratory equipment with smooth, anonymous surfaces. It was a throwback to a time before clutter and madness had taken over. If it weren't for the new-tunnel smell, the raw tang of cut rock the air carried, it would be possible to pretend nothing had happened.

Gunther stood in a telepresence rig, directing a remote through Bootstrap's apartments. They were like so many unconnected cells of chaos. He entered one and found the words BUDDHA = COSMIC INERTIA scrawled on its wall with what looked to be human feces. A woman sat on the futon tearing handfuls of batting from it and flinging them in the air. Cotton covered the room like a fresh snowfall. The next apartment was empty and clean, and a microfactory sat gleaming on a ledge. "I hereby nationalize you in the name of the People's Provisional Republic of Bootstrap, and of the oppressed masses everywhere," he said dryly. The remote gingerly picked it up. "You done with that chip diagram yet?"

"It will not be long now," Krishna said.

They were building a prototype controller. The idea was to code each peecee, so the CMP could identify and speak to its owner indi-

vidually. By stepping down the voltage, they could limit the peecee's transmission range to a meter and a half so that each afflicted person could be given individualized orders. The existing chips, however, were high-strung Swiss Orbital thoroughbreds, and couldn't handle oddball power yields. They had to be replaced.

"I don't see how you can expect to get any useful work out of these guys, though. I mean, what we need are supervisors. You can't hope to get coherent thought out of them."

Bent low over his peecee, Krishna did not answer at first. Then he said, "Do you know how a yogi stops his heart? We looked into that when I was in grad school. We asked Yogi Premanand if he would stop his heart while wired up to our instruments, and he graciously consented. We had all the latest brain scanners, but it turned out the most interesting results were recorded by the EKG.

"We found that the yogi's heart did not, as we had expected, slow down, but rather went faster and faster, until it reached its physical limits and began to fibrillate. He had not slowed his heart; he had sped it up. It did not stop, but went into spasm.

"After our tests, I asked him if he had known these facts. He said no, that they were most interesting. He was polite about it, but clearly did not think our findings very significant."

"So you're saying ... ?"

"The problem with schizophrenics is that they have too much going on in their heads. Too many voices. Too many ideas. They can't focus their attention on a single chain of thought. But it would be a mistake to think them incapable of complex reasoning. In fact, they're thinking brilliantly. Their brains are simply operating at such peak efficiencies that they can't organize their thoughts coherently.

"What the trance chip does is to provide one more voice, but a louder, more insistent one. That's why they obey it. It breaks through that noise, provides a focus, serves as a matrix along which thought can crystallize."

The remote unlocked the door into a conference room deep in the administrative tunnels. Eight microfactories waited in a neat row atop the conference table. It added the ninth, turned, and left, locking the door behind it. "You know," Gunther said, "all these elaborate precautions may be unnecessary. Whatever was used on Bootstrap may not be in the air anymore. It may never have been in the air. It could've been in the water or something."

"Oh, it's there all right, in the millions. We're dealing with an airborne schizomimetic engine. It's designed to hang around in the air indefinitely."

"A schizomimetic engine? What the hell is that?"

In a distracted monotone, Krishna said, "A schizomimetic engine is a strategic nonlethal weapon with high psychological impact. It not only incapacitates its target vectors, but places a disproportionately heavy burden on the enemy's manpower and material support caring for the victims. Due to the particular quality of the effect, it has a profoundly demoralizing influence on those exposed to the victims, especially those involved in their care. Thus, it is particularly desirable as a strategic weapon." He might have been quoting from an operations manual.

Gunther pondered that. "Calling the meeting over the chips wasn't a mistake, was it? You knew it would work. You knew they would obey a voice speaking inside their heads."

"Yes."

"This shit was brewed up at the Center, wasn't it? This is the stuff that you couldn't talk about."

"Some of it."

Gunther powered down his rig and flipped up the lens. "God damn you, Krishna! God damn you straight to Hell, you stupid fucker!"

Krishna looked up from his work, bewildered. "Have I said something wrong?"

"No! No, you haven't said a damned thing wrong—you've just driven four thousand people out of their fucking minds, is all! Wake up and take a good look at what you maniacs have done with your weapons research!"

"It wasn't weapons research," Krishna said mildly. He drew a long, involuted line on the schematic. "But when pure research is funded by the military, the military will seek out military applications for the research. That's just the way it is."

"What's the difference? It happened. You're responsible."

Now Krishna actually set his peecee aside. He spoke with uncharacteristic fire. "Gunther, we need this information. Do you realize that we are trying to run a technological civilization with a brain that was evolved in the neolithic? I am perfectly serious. We're all trapped in the old hunter-gatherer programs, and they are of no use to us anymore. Take a look at what's happening on Earth. They're hip-deep in a war

that nobody meant to start and nobody wants to fight and it's even money that nobody can stop. The type of thinking that put us in this corner is not to our benefit. It has to change. And that's what we are working toward—taming the human brain. Harnessing it. Reining it in.

"Granted, our research has been turned against us. But what's one more weapon among so many? If neuroprogrammers hadn't been available, something else would have been used. Mustard gas maybe, or plutonium dust. For that matter, they could've just blown a hole in the canopy and let us all strangle."

"That's self-justifying bullshit, Krishna! Nothing can excuse what you've done."

Quietly, but with conviction, Krishna said, "You will never convince me that our research is not the most important work we could possibly be doing today. We must seize control of this monster within our skulls. We must change our ways of thinking." His voice dropped. "The sad thing is that we cannot change unless we survive. But in order to survive, we must first change."

They worked in silence after that.

Gunther awoke from restless dreams to find that the sleep shift was only half over. Liza was snoring. Careful not to wake her, he pulled his clothes on and padded barefoot out of his niche and down the hall. The light was on in the common room and he heard voices.

Ekatarina looked up when he entered. Her face was pale and drawn. Faint circles had formed under her eyes. She was alone.

"Oh, hi. I was just talking with the CMP." She thought off her peecee. "Have a seat."

He pulled up a chair and hunched down over the table. Confronted by her, he found it took a slight but noticeable effort to draw his breath. "So. How are things going?"

"They'll be trying out your controllers soon. The first batch of chips ought to be coming out of the factories in an hour or so. I thought I'd stay up to see how they work out."

"It's that bad, then?" Ekatarina shook her head, would not look at him. "Hey, come on, here you are waiting up on the results, and I can see how tired you are. There must be a lot riding on this thing."

"More than you know," she said bleakly. "I've just been going over the numbers. Things are worse than you can imagine."

He reached out and took her cold, bloodless hand. She squeezed him so tightly it hurt. Their eyes met and he saw in hers all the fear and wonder he felt.

Wordlessly, they stood.

"I'm niching alone," Ekatarina said. She had not let go of his hand, held it so tightly in fact, that it seemed she would never let it go.

Gunther let her lead him away.

They made love, and talked quietly about inconsequential things, and made love again. Gunther had thought she would nod off immediately after the first time, but she was too full of nervous energy for that.

"Tell me when you're about to come," she murmured. "Tell me when you're coming."

He stopped moving. "Why do you always say that?"

Ekatarina looked up at him dazedly, and he repeated the question. Then she laughed a deep, throaty laugh. "Because I'm frigid."

"Hah?"

She took his hand, and brushed her cheek against it. Then she ducked her head, continuing the motion across her neck and up the side of her scalp. He felt the short, prickly hair against his palm and then, behind her ear, two bumps under the skin where biochips had been implanted. One of those would be her trance chip and the other … "It's a prosthetic," she explained. Her eyes were grey and solemn. "It hooks into the pleasure centers. When I need to, I can turn on my orgasm at a thought. That way we can always come at the same time." She moved her hips slowly beneath him as she spoke.

"But that means you don't really need to have any kind of sexual stimulation at all, do you? You can trigger an orgasm at will. While you're riding on a bus. Or behind a desk. You could just turn that thing on and come for hours at a time."

She looked amused. "I'll tell you a secret. When it was new, I used to do stunts like that. Everybody does. One outgrows that sort of thing quickly."

With more than a touch of stung pride, Gunther said, "Then what am I doing here? If you've got that thing, what the hell do you need me for?" He started to draw away from her.

She pulled him down atop her again. "You're kind of comforting," she said. "In an argumentative way. Come here."

He got back to his futon and began gathering up the pieces of his suit. Liza sat up sleepily and gawked at him. "So," she said. "It's like that, is it?"

"Yeah, well. I kind of left something unfinished. An old relationship." Warily, he extended a hand. "No hard feelings, huh?"

Ignoring his hand, she stood, naked and angry. "You got the nerve to stand there without even wiping my smile off your dick first and say no hard feelings? Asshole!"

"Aw, come on now, Liza, it's not like that."

"Like hell it's not! You got a shot at that white-assed Russian ice queen, and I'm history. Don't think I don't know all about her."

"I was hoping we could still be, you know, friends."

"Nice trick, shithead." She balled her fist and hit him hard in the center of his chest. Tears began to form in her eyes. "You just slink away. I'm tired of looking at you."

He left.

But did not sleep. Ekatarina was awake and ebullient over the first reports coming in of the new controller system. "They're working!" she cried. "They're working!" She'd pulled on a silk camisole, and strode back and forth excitedly, naked to the waist. Her pubic hair was a white flame, with almost invisible trails of smaller hairs reaching for her navel and caressing the sweet insides of her thighs. Tired as he was, Gunther felt new desire for her. In a weary, washed-out way, he was happy.

"Whooh!" She kissed him hard, not sexually, and called up the CMP. "Rerun all our earlier projections. We're putting our afflicted components back to work. Adjust all work schedules."

"As you direct."

"How does this change our long-range prospects?"

The program was silent for several seconds, processing. Then it said, "You are about to enter a necessary but very dangerous stage of recovery. You are going from a low-prospects high-stability situation to a high-prospects high-instability one. With leisure your unafflicted components will quickly grow dissatisfied with your government."

"What happens if I just step down?"

"Prospects worsen drastically."

Ekatarina ducked her head. "All right, what's likely to be our most pressing new problem?"

"The unafflicted components will demand to know more about the war on Earth. They'll want the media feeds restored immediately."

"I could rig up a receiver easily enough," Gunther volunteered. "Nothing fancy, but ..."

"Don't you dare!"

"Hah? Why not?"

"Gunther, let me put it to you this way: What two nationalities are most heavily represented here?"

"Well, I guess that would be Russia and—oh."

"Oh is right. For the time being, I think it's best if nobody knows for sure who's supposed to be enemies with whom." She asked the CMP, "How should I respond?"

"Until the situation stabilizes, you have no choice but distraction. Keep their minds occupied. Hunt down the saboteurs and then organize war crime trials."

"That's out. No witch hunts, no scapegoats, no trials. We're all in this together."

Emotionlessly, the CMP said, "Violence is the left hand of government. You are rash to dismiss its potentials without serious thought."

"I won't discuss it."

"Very well. If you wish to postpone the use of force for the present, you could hold a hunt for the weapon used on Bootstrap. Locating and identifying it would involve everyone's energies without necessarily implicating anybody. It would also be widely interpreted as meaning an eventual cure was possible, thus boosting the general morale without your actually lying."

Tiredly, as if this were something she had gone over many times already, she said, "Is there really no hope of curing them?"

"Anything is possible. In light of present resources, though, it cannot be considered likely."

Ekatarina thought the peecee off, dismissing the CMP. She sighed. "Maybe that's what we ought to do. Donkey up a hunt for the weapon. We ought to be able to do something with that notion."

Puzzled, Gunther said, "But it was one of Chang's weapons, wasn't it? A schizomimetic engine, right?"

"Where did you hear that?" she demanded sharply.

"Well, Krishna said … He didn't act like … I thought it was public knowledge."

Ekatarina's face hardened. "Program!" she thought.

The CMP came back to life. "Ready."

"Locate Krishna Narasimhan, unafflicted, Cadre Five. I want to speak with him immediately." Ekatarina snatched up her panties and shorts, and furiously began dressing. "Where are my damned sandals? Program! Tell him to meet me in the common room. Right away."

"Received."

To Gunther's surprise, it took over an hour for Ekatarina to browbeat Krishna into submission. Finally, though, the young research component went to a lockbox, identified himself to it, and unsealed the storage areas. "It's not all that secure," he said apologetically. "If our sponsors knew how often we just left everything open so we could get in and out, they'd—well, never mind."

He lifted a flat, palm-sized metal rectangle from a cabinet. "This is the most likely means of delivery. It's an aerosol bomb. The biological agents are loaded here, and it's triggered by snapping this back here. It's got enough pressure in it to spew the agents fifty feet straight up. Air currents do the rest." He tossed it to Gunther who stared down at the thing in horror. "Don't worry, it's not armed."

He slid out a slim drawer holding row upon gleaming row of slim chrome cylinders. "These contain the engines themselves. They're off-the-shelf nanoweaponry. State-of-the-art stuff, I guess." He ran a fingertip over them. "We've programmed each to produce a different mix of neurotransmitters. Dopamine, phencylclidine, norepinephrine, acetylcholine, met-enkephalin, substance P, serotonin—there's a hefty slice of Heaven in here, and—" he tapped an empty space "—right here is our missing bit of Hell." He frowned, and muttered, "That's curious. Why are there two cylinders missing?"

"What's that?" Ekatarina said. "I didn't catch what you just said."

"Oh, nothing important. Um, listen, it might help if I yanked a few biological pathways charts and showed you the chemical underpinnings of these things."

"Never mind that. Just keep it sweet and simple. Tell us about these schizomimetic engines."

It took over an hour to explain.

The engines were molecule-sized chemical factories, much like the assemblers in a microfactory. They had been provided by the military, in the hope Chang's group would come up with a misting weapon that could be sprayed in an army's path to cause them to change their loyalty. Gunther dozed off briefly while Krishna was explaining why that was impossible, and woke up sometime after the tiny engines had made their way into the brain.

"It's really a false schizophrenia," Krishna explained. "True schizophrenia is a beautifully complicated mechanism. What these engines create is more like a bargain-basement knockoff. They seize control of the brain chemistry, and start pumping out dopamine and a few other neuromediators. It's not an actual disorder, *per se*. They just keep the brain hopping." He coughed. "You see."

"Okay," Ekatarina said. "Okay. You say you can reprogram these things. How?"

"We use what are technically called messenger engines. They're like neuromodulators—they tell the schizomimetic engines what to do." He slid open another drawer, and in a flat voice said, "They're gone."

"Let's keep to the topic, if we may. We'll worry about your inventory later. Tell us about these messenger engines. Can you brew up a lot of them, to tell the schizomimetics to turn themselves off?"

"No, for two reasons. First, these molecules were hand-crafted in the Swiss Orbitals; we don't have the industrial plant to create them. Secondly, you can't tell the schizomimetics to turn themselves off. They don't have off switches. They're more like catalysts than actual machines. You can reconfigure them to produce different chemicals, but ..." He stopped, and a distant look came into his eyes. "Damn." He grabbed up his peecee, and a chemical pathways chart appeared on one wall. Then beside it, a listing of major neurofunctions. Then another chart covered with scrawled behavioral symbols. More and more data slammed up on the wall.

"Uh, Krishna ... ?"

"Oh, go away," he snapped. "This is important."

"You think you might be able to come up with a cure?"

"Cure? No. Something better. Much better."

Ekatarina and Gunther looked at each other. Then she said, "Do you need anything? Can I assign anyone to help you?"

"I need the messenger engines. Find them for me."

"How? How do we find them? Where do we look?"

"Sally Chang," Krishna said impatiently. "She must have them. Nobody else had access." He snatched up a light pen, and began scrawling crabbed formulae on the wall.

"I'll get her for you. Program! Tell—"

"Chang's a flick," Gunther reminded her. "She was caught by the aerosol bomb." Which she must surely have set herself. A neat way of disposing of evidence that might've led to whatever government was running her. She'd have been the first to go mad.

Ekatarina pinched her nose, wincing. "I've been awake too long," she said. "All right, I understand. Krishna, from now on you're assigned permanently to research. The CMP will notify your cadre leader. Let me know if you need any support. Find me a way to turn this damned weapon off." Ignoring the way he shrugged her off, she said to Gunther, "I'm yanking you from Cadre Four. From now on, you report directly to me. I want you to find Chang. Find her, and find those messenger engines."

Gunther was bone-weary. He couldn't remember when he'd last had a good eight hours sleep. But he managed what he hoped was a confident grin. "Received."

A madwoman should not have been able to hide herself. Sally Chang could. Nobody should have been able to evade the CMP's notice, now that it was hooked into a growing number of afflicted individuals. Sally Chang did. The CMP informed Gunther that none of the flicks were aware of Chang's whereabouts. It accepted a directive to have them all glance about for her once every hour until she was found.

In the west tunnels, walls had been torn out to create a space as large as any factory interior. The remotes had been returned, and were now manned by almost two hundred flicks spaced so that they did not impinge upon each other's fields of instruction. Gunther walked by them, through the CMP's whispering voices: "Are all bulldozers accounted for? If so … Clear away any malfunctioning machines; they can be placed … for vacuum-welded dust on the upper surfaces of the rails … reduction temperature, then look to see that the oxygen feed is compatible …" At the far end a single suit sat in a chair, overseer unit in its lap.

"How's it going?" Gunther asked.

"Absolutely top-notch." He recognized Takayuni's voice. "Most of the factories are up and running, and we're well on our way to having the railguns operative too. You wouldn't believe the kind of efficiencies we're getting here."

"Good, huh?"

Takayuni grinned; Gunther could hear it in his voice. "Industrious little buggers!"

Takayuni hadn't seen Chang. Gunther moved on.

Some hours later he found himself sitting wearily in Noguchi Park, looking at the torn-up dirt where the kneehigh forest had been. Not a seedling had been spared; the silver birch was extinct as a lunar species. Dead carp floated belly-up in the oil-slicked central lake; a chain-link fence circled it now, to keep out the flicks. There hadn't been the time yet to begin cleaning up the litter, and when he looked about, he saw trash everywhere. It was sad. It reminded him of Earth.

He knew it was time to get going, but he couldn't. His head sagged, touched his chest, and jerked up. Time had passed.

A flicker of motion made him turn. Somebody in a pastel lavender boutique suit hurried by. The woman who had directed him to the city controller's office the other day. "Hello!" he called. "I found everybody just where you said. Thanks. I was starting to get a little spooked."

The lavender suit turned to look at him. Sunlight glinted on black glass. A still, long minute later, she said, "Don't mention it," and started away.

"I'm looking for Sally Chang. Do you know her? Have you seen her? She's a flick, kind of a little woman, flamboyant, used to favor bright clothes, electric makeup, that sort of thing."

"I'm afraid I can't help you." Lavender was carrying three oxytanks in her arms. "You might try the straw market, though. Lots of bright clothes there." She ducked into a tunnel opening and disappeared within.

Gunther stared after her distractedly, then shook his head. He felt so very, very tired.

The straw market looked as though it had been through a storm. The tents had been torn down, the stands knocked over, the goods looted. Shards of orange and green glass crunched underfoot. Yet a rack of Ital-

ian scarfs worth a year's salary stood untouched amid the rubble. It made no sense at all.

Up and down the market, flicks were industriously cleaning up. They stooped and lifted and swept. One of them was being beaten by a suit.

Gunther blinked. He could not react to it as a real event. The woman cringed under the blows, shrieking wildly and scuttling away from them. One of the tents had been re-erected, and within the shadow of its rainbow silks, four other suits lounged against the bar. Not a one of them moved to help the woman.

"Hey!" Gunther shouted. He felt hideously self-conscious, as if he'd been abruptly thrust into the middle of a play without memorized lines or any idea of the plot or notion of what his role in it was. "Stop that!"

The suit turned toward him. It held the woman's slim arm captive in one gloved hand. "Go away," a male voice growled over the radio.

"What do you think you're doing? Who are you?" The man wore a Westinghouse suit, one of a dozen or so among the unafflicted. But Gunther recognized a brown, kidney-shaped scorch mark on the abdomen panel. "Posner—is that you? Let that woman go."

"She's not a woman," Posner said. "Hell, look at her—she's not even human. She's a flick."

Gunther set his helmet to record. "I'm taping this," he warned. "You hit that woman again, and Ekatarina will see it all. I promise."

Posner released the woman. She stood dazed for a second or two, and then the voice from her peecee reasserted control. She bent to pick up a broom, and returned to work.

Switching off his helmet, Gunther said, "Okay. What did she do?"

Indignantly, Posner extended a foot. He pointed sternly down at it. "She peed all over my boot!"

The suits in the tent had been watching with interest. Now they roared. "Your own fault, Will!" one of them called out. "I told you you weren't scheduling in enough time for personal hygiene."

"Don't worry about a little moisture. It'll boil off next time you hit vacuum!"

But Gunther was not listening. He stared at the flick Posner had been mistreating and wondered why he hadn't recognized Anya earlier. Her mouth was pursed, her face squinched up tight with worry, as if

there were a key in the back of her head that had been wound three times too many. Her shoulders cringed forward now, too. But still.

"I'm sorry, Anya," he said. "Hiro is dead. There wasn't anything we could do."

She went on sweeping, oblivious, unhappy.

He caught the shift's last jitney back to the Center. It felt good to be home again. Miiko Ezumi had decided to loot the outlying factories of their oxygen and water surpluses, then carved a shower room from the rock. There was a long line for only three minutes' use, and no soap, but nobody complained. Some people pooled their time, showering two and three together. Those waiting their turns joked rowdily.

Gunther washed, grabbed some clean shorts and a Glavkosmos teeshirt, and padded down the hall. He hesitated outside the common room, listening to the gang sitting around the table, discussing the more colorful flicks they'd encountered.

"Have you seen the Mouse Hunter?"

"Oh yeah, and Ophelia!"

"The Pope!"

"The Duck Lady!

"Everybody knows the Duck Lady!"

They were laughing and happy. A warm sense of community flowed from the room, what Gunther's father would have in his sloppy-sentimental way called *Gemütlichkeit*. Gunther stepped within.

Liza Nagenda looked up, all gums and teeth, and froze. Her jaw snapped shut. "Well, if it isn't Izmailova's personal spy!"

"What?" The accusation took Gunther's breath away. He looked helplessly about the room. Nobody would meet his eye. They had all fallen silent.

Liza's face was grey with anger. "You heard me! It was you that ratted on Krishna, wasn't it?"

"Now that's way out of line! You've got a lot of fucking gall if—" He controlled himself with an effort. There was no sense in matching her hysteria with his own. "It's none of your business what my relationship with Izmailova is or is not." He looked around the table. "Not that any of you deserve to know, but Krishna's working on a cure. If anything I said or did helped put him back in the lab, well then, so be it."

She smirked. "So what's your excuse for snitching on Will Posner?"

"I never—"

"We all heard the story! You told him you were going to run straight to your precious Izmailova with your little helmet vids."

"Now, Liza," Takayuni began. She slapped him away.

"Do you know what Posner was doing?" Gunther shook a finger in Liza's face. "Hah? Do you? He was beating a woman—Anya! He was beating Anya right out in the open!"

"So what? He's one of us, isn't he? Not a zoned-out, dead-eyed, ranting, drooling flick!"

"You bitch!" Outraged, Gunther lunged at Liza across the table. "I'll kill you, I swear it!" People jerked back from him, rushed forward, a chaos of motion. Posner thrust himself in Gunther's way, arms spread, jaw set and manly. Gunther punched him in the face. Posner looked surprised, and fell back. Gunther's hand stung, but he felt strangely good anyway; if everyone else was crazy, then why not him?

"You just try it!" Liza shrieked. "I knew you were that type all along!"

Takayuni grabbed Liza away one way. Hamilton seized Gunther and yanked him the other. Two of Posner's friends were holding him back as well.

"I've had about all I can take from you!" Gunther shouted. "You cheap cunt!"

"Listen to him! Listen what he calls me!"

Screaming, they were shoved out opposing doors.

"It's all right, Gunther." Beth had flung him into the first niche they'd come to. He slumped against a wall, shaking, and closed his eyes. "It's all right now."

But it wasn't. Gunther was suddenly struck with the realization that with the exception of Ekatarina he no longer had any friends. Not real friends, close friends. How could this have happened? It was as if everyone had been turned into werewolves. Those who weren't actually mad were still monsters. "I don't understand."

Hamilton sighed. "What don't you understand, Weil?"

"The way people—the way we all treat the flicks. When Posner was beating Anya, there were four other suits standing nearby, and not a one of them so much as lifted a finger to stop him. Not one! And I felt

it too, there's no use pretending I'm superior to the rest of them. I wanted to walk on and pretend I hadn't seen a thing. What's happened to us?"

Hamilton shrugged. Her hair was short and dark about her plain round face. "I went to a pretty expensive school when I was a kid. One year we had one of those exercises that're supposed to be personally enriching. You know? A life experience. We were divided into two groups—Prisoners and Guards. The Prisoners couldn't leave their assigned areas without permission from a guard, the Guards got better lunches, stuff like that. Very simple set of rules. I was a Guard.

"Almost immediately, we started to bully the Prisoners. We pushed 'em around, yelled at 'em, kept 'em in line. What was amazing was that the Prisoners let us do it. They outnumbered us five to one. We didn't even have authority for the things we did. But not a one of them complained. Not a one of them stood up and said No, you can't do this. They played the game.

"At the end of the month, the project was dismantled and we had some study seminars on what we'd learned: the roots of fascism, and so on. Read some Hannah Arendt. And then it was all over. Except that my best girlfriend never spoke to me again. I couldn't blame her either. Not after what I'd done.

"What did I really learn? That people will play whatever role you put them in. They'll do it without knowing that that's what they're doing. Take a minority, tell them they're special, and make them guards—they'll start playing Guard."

"So what's the answer? How do we keep from getting caught up in the roles we play?"

"Damned if I know, Weil. Damned if I know."

Ekatarina had moved her niche to the far end of a new tunnel. Hers was the only room the tunnel served, and consequently she had a lot of privacy. As Gunther stepped in, a static-y voice swam into focus on his trance chip. "... reported shock. In Cairo, government officials pledged ..." It cut off.

"Hey! You've restored—" He stopped. If radio reception had been restored, he'd have known. It would have been the talk of the Center. Which meant that radio contact had never really been completely broken. It was simply being controlled by the CMP.

Ekatarina looked up at him. She'd been crying, but she'd stopped. "The Swiss Orbitals are gone!" she whispered. "They hit them with

everything from softbombs to brilliant pebbles. They dusted the shipyards."

The scope of all those deaths obscured what she was saying for a second. He sank down beside her. "But that means—"

"There's no spacecraft that can reach us, yes. Unless there's a ship in transit, we're stranded here."

He took her in his arms. She was cold and shivering. Her skin felt clammy and mottled with gooseflesh. "How long has it been since you've had any sleep?" he asked sharply.

"I can't—"

"You're wired, aren't you?"

"I can't afford to sleep. Not now. Later."

"Ekatarina. The energy you get from wire isn't free. It's only borrowed from your body. When you come down, it all comes due. If you wire yourself up too tightly, you'll crash yourself right into a coma."

"I haven't been—" She stalled, and a confused, uncertain look entered her eyes. "Maybe you're right. I could probably use a little rest."

The CMP came to life. "Cadre Nine is building a radio receiver. Ezumi gave them the go-ahead."

"Shit!" Ekatarina sat bolt upright. "Can we stop it?"

"Moving against a universally popular project would cost you credibility you cannot afford to lose."

"Okay, so how can we minimize the—"

"Ekatarina," Gunther said. "Sleep, remember?"

"In a sec, babe." She patted the futon. "You just lie down and wait for me. I'll have this wrapped up before you can nod off." She kissed him gently, lingeringly. "All right?"

"Yeah, sure." He lay down and closed his eyes, just for a second.

When he awoke, it was time to go on shift, and Ekatarina was gone.

It was only the fifth day since Vladivostok. But everything was so utterly changed that times before then seemed like memories of another world. In a previous life I was Gunther Weil, he thought. I lived and worked and had a few laughs. Life was pretty good then.

He was still looking for Sally Chang, though with dwindling hope. Now, whenever he talked to suits he'd ask if they needed his help. Increasingly, they did not.

The third-level chapel was a shallow bowl facing the terrace wall. Tiger lilies grew about the chancel area at the bottom, and turquoise lizards skittered over the rock. The children were playing with a ball in the chancel. Gunther stood at the top, chatting with a sad-voiced Ryohei Iomato.

The children put away the ball and began to dance. They were playing London Bridge. Gunther watched them with a smile. From above they were so many spots of color, a flower unfolding and closing in on itself. Slowly, the smile faded. They were dancing too well. Not one of the children moved out of step, lost her place, or walked away sulking. Their expressions were intense, self-absorbed, inhuman. Gunther had to turn away.

"The CMP controls them," Iomato said. "I don't have much to do, really. I go through the vids and pick out games for them to play, songs to sing, little exercises to keep them healthy. Sometimes I have them draw."

"My God, how can you stand it?"

Iomato sighed. "My old man was an alcoholic. He had a pretty rough life, and at some point he started drinking to blot out the pain. You know what?"

"It didn't work."

"Yah. Made him even more miserable. So then he had twice the reason to get drunk. He kept on trying, though, I've got to give him that. He wasn't the sort of man to give up on something he believed in just because it wasn't working the way it should."

Gunther said nothing.

"I think that memory is the only thing keeping me from just taking off my helmet and joining them."

The Corporate Video Center was a narrow run of offices in the farthest tunnel reaches, where raw footage for adverts and incidental business use was processed before being squirted to better-equipped vid centers on Earth. Gunther passed from office to office, slapping off flatscreens left flickering since the disaster.

It was unnerving going through the normally busy rooms and finding no one. The desks and cluttered work stations had been abandoned in purposeful disarray, as though their operators had merely stepped out for a break and would be back momentarily. Gunther found him-

self spinning around to confront his shadow, and flinching at unexpected noises. With each machine he turned off, the silence at his back grew. It was twice as lonely as being out on the surface.

He doused a last light and stepped into the gloomy hall. Two suits with interwoven H-and-A logos loomed up out of the shadows. He jumped in shock. The suits did not move. He laughed wryly at himself, and pushed past. They were empty, of course—there were no Hyundai Aerospace components among the unafflicted. Someone had simply left these suits here in temporary storage before the madness.

The suits grabbed him.

"Hey!" He shouted in terror as they seized him by the arms and lifted him off his feet. One of them hooked the peecee from his harness and snapped it off. Before he knew what was happening he'd been swept down a short flight of stairs and through a doorway.

"Mr. Weil."

He was in a high-ceilinged room carved into the rock to hold air-handling equipment that hadn't been constructed yet. A high string of temporary work lamps provided dim light. To the far side of the room a suit sat behind a desk, flanked by two more, standing. They all wore Hyundai Aerospace suits. There was no way he could identify them.

The suits that had brought him in crossed their arms.

"What's going on here?" Gunther asked. "Who are you?"

"You are the last person we'd tell that to." He couldn't tell which one had spoken. The voice came over his radio, made sexless and impersonal by an electronic filter. "Mr. Weil, you stand accused of crimes against your fellow citizens. Do you have anything to say in your defense?"

"What?" Gunther looked at the suits before him and to either side. They were perfectly identical, indistinguishable from each other, and he was suddenly afraid of what the people within might feel free to do, armored as they were in anonymity. "Listen, you've got no right to do this. There's a governmental structure in place, if you've got any complaints against me."

"Not everyone is pleased with Izmailova's government," the judge said.

"But she controls the CMP, and we could not run Bootstrap without the CMP controlling the flicks," a second added.

"We simply have to work around her." Perhaps it was the judge; perhaps it was yet another of the suits. Gunther couldn't tell.

"Do you wish to speak on your own behalf?"

"What exactly am I charged with?" Gunther asked desperately. "Okay, maybe I've done something wrong, I'll entertain that possibility. But maybe you just don't understand my situation. Have you considered that?"

Silence.

"I mean, just what are you angry about? Is it Posner? Because I'm not sorry about that. I won't apologize. You can't mistreat people just because they're sick. They're still people, like anybody else. They have their rights."

Silence.

"But if you think I'm some kind of a spy or something, that I'm running around and ratting on people to Ek—to Izmailova, well that's simply not true. I mean, I talk to her, I'm not about to pretend I don't, but I'm not her spy or anything. She doesn't have any spies. She doesn't need any! She's just trying to hold things together, that's all.

"Jesus, you don't know what she's gone through for you! You haven't seen how much it takes out of her! She'd like nothing better than to quit. But she has to hang in there because—" An eerie dark electronic gabble rose up on his radio, and he stopped as he realized that they were laughing at him.

"Does anyone else wish to speak?"

One of Gunther's abductors stepped forward. "Your honor, this man says that flicks are human. He overlooks the fact that they cannot live without our support and direction. Their continued well-being is bought at the price of our unceasing labor. He stands condemned out of his own mouth. I petition the court to make the punishment fit the crime."

The judge looked to the right, to the left. His two companions nodded, and stepped back into the void. The desk had been set up at the mouth of what was to be the air intake duct. Gunther had just time enough to realize this when they reappeared, leading someone in a G5 suit identical to his own.

"We could kill you, Mr. Weil," the artificial voice crackled. "But that would be wasteful. Every hand, every mind is needed. We must all pull together in our time of need."

The G5 suit stood alone and motionless in the center of the room.

"Watch."

Two of the Hyundai suits stepped up to the G5 suit. Four hands converged on the helmet seals. With practiced efficiency, they flicked the latches and lifted the helmet. It happened so swiftly the occupant could not have stopped it if he'd tried.

Beneath the helmet was the fearful, confused face of a flick.

"Sanity is a privilege, Mr. Weil, not a right. You are guilty as charged. However, we are not cruel men. This once we will let you off with a warning. But these are desperate times. At your next offense—be it only so minor a thing as reporting this encounter to the Little General—we may be forced to dispense with the formality of a hearing." The judge paused. "Do I make myself clear?"

Reluctantly, Gunther nodded.

"Then you may leave."

On the way out, one of the suits handed him back his peecee.

Five people. He was sure there weren't any more involved than that. Maybe one or two more, but that was it. Posner had to be hip-deep in this thing, he was certain of that. It shouldn't be too hard to figure out the others.

He didn't dare take the chance.

At shift's end he found Ekatarina already asleep. She looked haggard and unhealthy. He knelt by her, and gently brushed her cheek with the back of one hand.

Her eyelids fluttered open.

"Oh, hey. I didn't mean to wake you. Just go back to sleep, huh?"

She smiled. "You're sweet, Gunther, but I was only taking a nap anyway. I've got to be up in another fifteen minutes." Her eyes closed again. "You're the only one I can really trust anymore. Everybody's lying to me, feeding me misinformation, keeping silent when there's something I need to know. You're the only one I can count on to tell me things."

You have enemies, he thought. They call you the Little General, and they don't like how you run things. They're not ready to move against you directly, but they have plans. And they're ruthless.

Aloud, he said, "Go back to sleep."

"They're all against me," she murmured. "Bastard sons of bitches."

The next day he spent going through the service spaces for the new air-handling system. He found a solitary flick's nest made of shredded

vacuum suits, but after consultation with the CMP concluded that nobody had lived there for days. There was no trace of Sally Chang.

If it had been harrowing going through the sealed areas before his trial, it was far worse today. Ekatarina's enemies had infected him with fear. Reason told him they were not waiting for him, that he had nothing to worry about until he displeased them again. But the hindbrain did not listen.

Time crawled. When he finally emerged into daylight at the end of his shift, he felt light-headedly out of phase with reality from the hours of isolation. At first he noticed nothing out of the ordinary. Then his suit radio was full of voices, and people were hurrying about every which way. There was a happy buzz in the air. Somebody was singing.

He snagged a passing suit and asked, "What's going on?"

"Haven't you heard? The war is over. They've made peace. And there's a ship coming in!"

The *Lake Geneva* had maintained television silence through most of the long flight to the Moon for fear of long-range beam weapons. With peace, however, they opened direct transmission to Bootstrap.

Ezumi's people had the flicks sew together an enormous cotton square and hack away some hanging vines so they could hang it high on the shadowed side of the crater. Then, with the fill lights off, the video image was projected. Swiss spacejacks tumbled before the camera, grinning, all denim and red cowboy hats. They were talking about their escape from the hunter-seeker missiles, brash young voices running one over the other.

The top officers were assembled beneath the cotton square. Gunther recognized their suits. Ekatarina's voice boomed from newly erected loudspeakers. "When are you coming in? We have to make sure the spaceport field is clear. How many hours?"

Holding up five fingers, a blond woman said, "Forty-five!"

"No, forty-three!"

"Nothing like that!"

"Almost forty-five!"

Again Ekatarina's voice cut into the tumult. "What's it like in the orbitals? We heard they were destroyed."

"Yes, destroyed!"

"Very bad, very bad, it'll take years to—"

"But most of the people are—"

"We were given six orbits warning; most went down in lifting bodies, there was a big evacuation."

"Many died, though. It was very bad."

Just below the officers, a suit had been directing several flicks as they assembled a camera platform. Now it waved broadly, and the flicks stepped away. In the *Lake Geneva* somebody shouted, and several heads turned to stare at an offscreen television monitor. The suit turned the camera, giving them a slow, panoramic scan.

One of the spacejacks said, "What's it like there? I see that some of you are wearing space suits, and the rest are not. Why is that?"

Ekatarina took a deep breath. "There have been some changes here."

There was one hell of a party at the Center when the Swiss arrived. Sleep schedules were juggled, and save for a skeleton crew overseeing the flicks, everyone turned out to welcome the dozen newcomers to the Moon. They danced to skiffle, and drank vacuum-distilled vodka. Everyone had stories to tell, rumors to swap, opinions on the likelihood that the peace would hold.

Gunther wandered away midway through the party. The Swiss depressed him. They all seemed so young and fresh and eager. He felt battered and cynical in their presence. He wanted to grab them by the shoulders and shake them awake.

Depressed, he wandered through the locked-down laboratories. Where the Viral Computer Project had been, he saw Ekatarina and the captain of the *Lake Geneva* conferring over a stack of crated bioflops. They bent low over Ekatarina's peecee, listening to the CMP.

"Have you considered nationalizing your industries?" the captain asked. "That would give us the plant needed to build the New City. Then, with a few hardwired utilities, Bootstrap could be managed without anyone having to set foot inside it."

Gunther was too distant to hear the CMP's reaction, but he saw both women laugh. "Well," said Ekatarina. "At the very least we will have to renegotiate terms with the parent corporations. With only one ship functional, people can't be easily replaced. Physical presence has become a valuable commodity. We'd be fools not to take advantage of it."

He passed on, deeper into shadow, wandering aimlessly. Eventually, there was a light ahead, and he heard voices. One was Krishna's, but spoken faster and more forcefully than he was used to hearing it. Curious, he stopped just outside the door.

Krishna was in the center of the lab. Before him, Beth Hamilton stood nodding humbly. "Yes, sir," she said. "I'll do that. Yes." Dumbfounded, Gunther realized that Krishna was giving her orders.

Krishna glanced up. "Weil! You're just the man I was about to come looking for."

"I am?"

"Come in here, don't dawdle." Krishna smiled and beckoned, and Gunther had no choice but to obey. He looked like a young god now. The force of his spirit danced in his eyes like fire. It was strange that Gunther had never noticed before how tall he was. "Tell me where Sally Chang is."

"I don't—I mean, I can't, I—" He stopped and swallowed. "I think Chang must be dead." Then, "Krishna? What's happened to you?"

"He's finished his research," Beth said.

"I rewrote my personality from top to bottom," Krishna said. "I'm not half-crippled with shyness anymore—have you noticed?" He put a hand on Gunther's shoulder, and it was reassuring, warm, comforting. "Gunther, I won't tell you what it took to scrape together enough messenger engines from traces of old experiments to try this out on myself. But it works. We've got a treatment that among other things will serve as a universal cure for everyone in Bootstrap. But to do that, we need the messenger engines, and they're not here. Now tell me why you think Sally Chang is dead."

"Well, uh, I've been searching for her for four days. And the CMP has been looking too. You've been holed up here all that time, so maybe you don't know the flicks as well as the rest of us do. But they're not very big on planning. The likelihood one of them could actively evade detection that long is practically zilch. The only thing I can think is that somehow she made it to the surface before the effects hit her, got into a truck and told it to drive as far as her oxygen would take her."

Krishna shook his head and said, "No. It is simply not consistent with Sally Chang's character. With all the best will in the world, I cannot picture her killing herself." He slid open a drawer: row upon row of gleaming canisters. "This may help. Do you remember when I said

there were canisters of mimetic engines missing, not just the schizomimetic?"

"Vaguely."

"I've been too busy to worry about it, but wasn't that odd? Why would Chang have taken a canister and not used it?"

"What was in the second canister?" Hamilton asked.

"Paranoia," Krishna said. "Or rather a good enough chemical analog. Now, paranoia is a rare disability, but a fascinating one. It's characterized by an elaborate but internally consistent delusional system. The paranoid patient functions well intellectually, and is less fragmented than a schizophrenic. Her emotional and social responses are closer to normal. She's capable of concerted effort. In a time of turmoil, it's quite possible that a paranoid individual could elude our detection."

"Okay, let's get this straight," Hamilton said. "War breaks out on Earth. Chang gets her orders, keys in the software bombs, and goes to Bootstrap with a canister full of madness and a little syringe of paranoia—no, it doesn't work. It all falls apart."

"How so?"

"Paranoia wouldn't inoculate her against schizophrenia. How does she protect herself from her own aerosols?"

Gunther stood transfixed. "Lavender!"

They caught up with Sally Chang on the topmost terrace of Bootstrap. The top level was undeveloped. Someday—so the corporate brochures promised—fallow deer would graze at the edge of limpid pools, and otters frolic in the streams. But the soil hadn't been built up yet, the worms brought in or the bacteria seeded. There were only sand, machines, and a few unhappy opportunistic weeds.

Chang's camp was to one side of a streamhead, beneath a fill light. She started to her feet at their approach, glanced quickly to the side and decided to brazen it out.

A sign reading EMERGENCY CANOPY MAINTENANCE STATION had been welded to a strut supporting the stream's valve stem. Under it were a short stacked pyramid of oxytanks and an aluminum storage crate the size of a coffin. "Very clever," Beth muttered over Gunther's trance chip. "She sleeps in the storage crate, and anybody stumbling across her thinks it's just spare equipment."

The lavender suit raised an arm and casually said, "Hiya, guys. How can I help you?"

Krishna strode forward and took her hands. "Sally, it's me—Krishna!"

"Oh, thank God!" She slumped in his arms. "I've been so afraid."

"You're all right now."

"I thought you were an Invader at first, when I saw you coming up. I'm so hungry—I haven't eaten since I don't know when." She clutched at the sleeve of Krishna's suit. "You do know about the Invaders, don't you?"

"Maybe you'd better bring me up to date."

They began walking toward the stairs. Krishna gestured quietly to Gunther and then toward Chang's worksuit harness. A canister the size of a hip flask hung there. Gunther reached over and plucked it off. The messenger engines! He held them in his hand.

To the other side, Beth Hamilton plucked up the near-full cylinder of paranoia-inducing engines and made it disappear.

Sally Chang, deep in the explication of her reasonings, did not notice. "... obeyed my orders, of course. But they made no sense. I worried and worried about that until finally I realized what was really going on. A wolf caught in a trap will gnaw off its leg to get free. I began to look for the wolf. What kind of enemy justified such extreme actions? Certainly nothing human."

"Sally," Krishna said, "I want you to entertain the notion that the conspiracy—for want of a better word—may be more deeply rooted than you suspect. That the problem is not an external enemy, but the workings of our own brains. Specifically that the Invaders are an artifact of the psychotomimetics you injected into yourself back when this all began."

"No. No, there's too much evidence. It all fits together! The Invaders needed a way to disguise themselves both physically, which was accomplished by the vacuum suits, and psychologically, which was achieved by the general madness. Thus, they can move undetected among us. Would a human enemy have converted all of Bootstrap to slave labor? Unthinkable! They can read our minds like a book. If we hadn't protected ourselves with the schizomimetics, they'd be able to extract all our knowledge, all our military research secrets ..."

Listening, Gunther couldn't help imagining what Liza Nagenda would say to all of this wild talk. At the thought of her, his jaw clenched.

Just like one of Chang's machines, he realized, and couldn't help being amused at his own expense.

Ekatarina was waiting at the bottom of the stairs. Her hands trembled noticeably, and there was a slight quaver in her voice when she said, "What's all this the CMP tells me about messenger engines? Krishna's supposed to have come up with a cure of some kind?"

"We've got them," Gunther said quietly, happily. He held up the canister. "It's over now, we can heal our friends."

"Let me see," Ekatarina said. She took the canister from his hand.

"No, wait!" Hamilton cried, too late. Behind her, Krishna was arguing with Sally Chang about her interpretations of recent happenings.

Neither had noticed yet that those in front had stopped.

"Stand back." Ekatarina took two quick steps backward. Edgily, she added, "I don't mean to be difficult. But we're going to sort this all out, and until we do, I don't want anybody too close to me. That includes you too, Gunther."

Flicks began gathering. By ones and twos they wandered up the lawn, and then by the dozen. By the time it was clear that Ekatarina had called them up via the CMP, Krishna, Chang and Hamilton were separated from her and Gunther by a wall of people.

Chang stood very still. Somewhere behind her unseen face, she was revising her theories to include this new event. Suddenly, her hands slapped at her suit, grabbing for the missing canisters. She looked at Krishna and with a trill of horror said, "You're one of them!"

"Of course I'm not—" Krishna began. But she was turning, stumbling, fleeing back up the steps.

"Let her go," Ekatarina ordered. "We've got more serious things to talk about." Two flicks scurried up, lugging a small industrial kiln between them. They set it down, and a third plugged in an electric cable. The interior began to glow. "This canister is all you've got, isn't it? If I were to autoclave it, there wouldn't be any hope of replacing its contents."

"Izmailova, listen," Krishna said.

"I am listening. Talk."

Krishna explained, while Izmailova listened with arms folded and shoulders tilted skeptically. When he was done, she shook her head.

"It's a noble folly, but folly is all it is. You want to reshape our minds into something alien to the course of human evolution. To turn the seat of thought into a jet pilot's couch. This is your idea of a solution? Forget it. Once this particular box is opened, there'll be no putting its contents back in again. And you haven't advanced any convincing arguments for opening it."

"But the people in Bootstrap!" Gunther objected. "They—"

She cut him off. "Gunther, nobody likes what's happened to them. But if the rest of us must give up our humanity to pay for a speculative and ethically dubious rehabilitation ... Well, the price is simply too high. Mad or not, they're at least human now."

"Am I inhuman?" Krishna asked. "If you tickle me, do I not laugh?"

"You're in no position to judge. You've rewired your neurons and you're stoned on the novelty. What tests have you run on yourself? How thoroughly have you mapped out your deviations from human norms? Where are your figures?" These were purely rhetorical questions; the kind of analyses she meant took weeks to run. "Even if you check out completely human—and I don't concede you will!—who's to say what the long-range consequences are? What's to stop us from drifting, step by incremental step, into madness? Who decides what madness is? Who programs the programmers? No, this is impossible. I won't gamble with our minds." Defensively, almost angrily, she repeated, "I won't gamble with our minds."

"Ekatarina," Gunther said gently, "how long have you been up? Listen to yourself. The wire is doing your thinking for you."

She waved a hand dismissively, without responding.

"Just as a practical matter," Hamilton said, "how do you expect to run Bootstrap without it? The setup now is turning us all into baby fascists. You say you're worried about madness—what will we be like a year from now?"

"The CMP assures me—"

"The CMP is only a program!" Hamilton cried. "No matter how much interactivity it has, it's not flexible. It has no hope. It cannot judge a new thing. It can only enforce old decisions, old values, old habits, old fears."

Abruptly Ekatarin a snapped. "Get out of my face!" she screamed. "Stop it, stop it, stop it! I won't listen to any more."

"Ekatarina—" Gunther began.

But her hand had tightened on the canister. Her knees bent as she began a slow genuflection to the kiln. Gunther could see that she had stopped listening. Drugs and responsibility had done this to her, speeding her up and bewildering her with conflicting demands, until she stood trembling on the brink of collapse. A good night's sleep might have restored her, made her capable of being reasoned with. But there was no time. Words would not stop her now. And she was too far distant for him to reach before she destroyed the engines. In that instant he felt such a strong outwelling of emotion toward her as would be impossible to describe.

"Ekatarina," he said. "I love you."

She half-turned her head toward him and in a distracted, somewhat irritated tone said, "What are you—"

He lifted the bolt gun from his work harness, leveled it, and fired.

Ekatarina's helmet shattered.

She fell.

"I should have shot to just breach the helmet. That would have stopped her. But I didn't think I was a good enough shot. I aimed right for the center of her head."

"Hush," Hamilton said. "You did what you had to. Stop tormenting yourself. Talk about more practical things."

He shook his head, still groggy. For the longest time, he had been kept on beta endorphins, unable to feel a thing, unable to care. It was like being swathed in cotton batting. Nothing could reach him. Nothing could hurt him. "How long have I been out of it?"

"A day."

"A day!" He looked about the austere room. Bland rock walls and laboratory equipment with smooth, noncommital surfaces. To the far end, Krishna and Chang were hunched over a swipeboard, arguing happily and impatiently overwriting each other's scrawls. A Swiss spacejack came in and spoke to their backs. Krishna nodded distractedly, not looking up. "I thought it was much longer."

"Long enough. We've already salvaged everyone connected with Sally Chang's group, and gotten a good start on the rest. Pretty soon it will be time to decide how you want yourself rewritten."

He shook his head, feeling dead. "I don't think I'll bother, Beth. I just don't have the stomach for it."

"We'll give you the stomach."

"Naw, I don't ..." He felt a black nausea come welling up again. It was cyclic; it returned every time he was beginning to think he'd finally put it down. "I don't want the fact that I killed Ekatarina washed away in a warm flood of self-satisfaction. The idea disgusts me."

"We don't want that either." Posner led a delegation of seven into the lab. Krishna and Chang rose to face them, and the group broke into swirling halves. "There's been enough of that. It's time we all started taking responsibility for the consequences of—" Everyone was talking at once. Hamilton made a face.

"Started taking responsibility for—"

Voices rose.

"We can't talk here," she said. "Take me out on the surface."

They drove with the cabin pressurized, due west on the Seething Bay road. Ahead, the sun was almost touching the weary walls of Som-mering crater. Shadow crept down from the mountains and cratertops, yearning toward the radiantly lit Sinus Medii. Gunther found it achingly beautiful. He did not want to respond to it, but the harsh lines echoed the lonely hurt within him in a way that he found oddly comforting.

Hamilton touched her peecee. *Putting on the Ritz* filled their heads.

"What if Ekatarina was right?" he said sadly. "What if we're giving up everything that makes us human? The prospect of being turned into some kind of big-domed emotionless superman doesn't appeal to me much."

Hamilton shook her head. "I asked Krishna about that, and he said No. He said it was like ... Were you ever nearsighted?"

"Sure, as a kid."

"Then you'll understand. He said it was like the first time you came out of the doctor's office after being lased. How everything seemed clear and vivid and distinct. What had once been a blur that you called 'tree' resolved itself into a thousand individual and distinct leaves. The world was filled with unexpected detail. There were things on the horizon that you'd never seen before. Like that."

"Oh." He stared ahead. The disk of the sun was almost touching Sommering. "There's no point in going any farther."

He powered down the truck.

Beth Hamilton looked uncomfortable. She cleared her throat and with brusque energy said, "Gunther, look. I had you bring me out here for a reason. I want to propose a merger of resources."

"A what?"

"Marriage."

It took Gunther a second to absorb what she had said. "Aw, no … I don't …"

"I'm serious. Gunther, I know you think I've been hard on you, but that's only because I saw a lot of potential in you, and that you were doing nothing with it. Well, things have changed. Give me a say in your rewrite, and I'll do the same for you."

He shook his head. "This is just too weird for me."

"It's too late to use that as an excuse. Ekatarina was right—we're sitting on top of something very dangerous, the most dangerous opportunity humanity faces today. It's out of the bag, though. Word has gotten out. Earth is horrified and fascinated. They'll be watching us. Briefly, very briefly, we can control this thing. We can help to shape it now, while it's small. Five years from now, it will be out of our hands.

"You have a good mind, Gunther, and it's about to get better. I think we agree on what kind of a world we want to make. I want you on my side."

"I don't know what to say."

"You want true love? You got it. We can make the sex as sweet or nasty as you like. Nothing easier. You want me quieter, louder, gentler, more assured? We can negotiate. Let's see if we can come to terms."

He said nothing.

Hamilton eased back in the seat. After a time, she said, "You know? I've never watched a lunar sunset before. I don't get out on the surface much."

"We'll have to change that," Gunther said.

Hamilton stared hard into his face. Then she smiled. She wriggled closer to him. Clumsily, he put an arm over her shoulder. It seemed to be what was expected of him. He coughed into his hand, then pointed a finger. "There it goes."

Lunar sunset was a simple thing. The crater wall touched the bottom of the solar disk. Shadows leaped from the slopes and raced across the lowlands. Soon half the sun was gone. Smoothly, without distortion, it dwindled. A last brilliant sliver of light burned atop the rock,

then ceased to be. In the instant before the windshield adjusted and the stars appeared, the universe filled with darkness.

The air in the cab cooled. The panels snapped and popped with the sudden shift in temperature.

Now Hamilton was nuzzling the side of his neck. Her skin was slightly tacky to the touch, and exuded a faint but distinct odor. She ran her tongue up the line of his chin and poked it in his ear. Her hand fumbled with the latches of his suit.

Gunther experienced no arousal at all, only a mild distaste that bordered on disgust. This was horrible, a defilement of all he had felt for Ekatarina.

But it was a chore he had to get through. Hamilton was right. All his life his hindbrain had been in control, driving him with emotions chemically derived and randomly applied. He had been lashed to the steed of consciousness and forced to ride it wherever it went, and that nightmare gallop had brought him only pain and confusion. Now that he had control of the reins, he could make this horse go where he wanted.

He was not sure what he would demand from his reprogramming. Contentment, perhaps. Sex and passion, almost certainly. But not love. He was done with the romantic illusion. It was time to grow up.

He squeezed Beth's shoulder. One more day, he thought, and it won't matter. I'll feel whatever is best for me to feel. Beth raised her mouth to his. Her lips parted. He could smell her breath.

They kissed.

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Ann Broomhead & Tim Szczesuil
Littleton, Massachusetts
December 1999

Colophon

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The cover art is available in a large format, limited edition, METAlitho from Braid Media Arts (www.braid.com).

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Michael Swanwick is a true seer in the best sense of that word.—*David Zindell*

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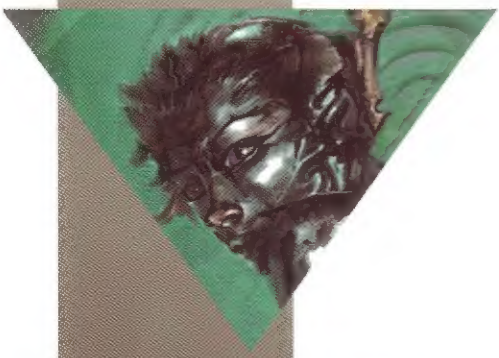

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